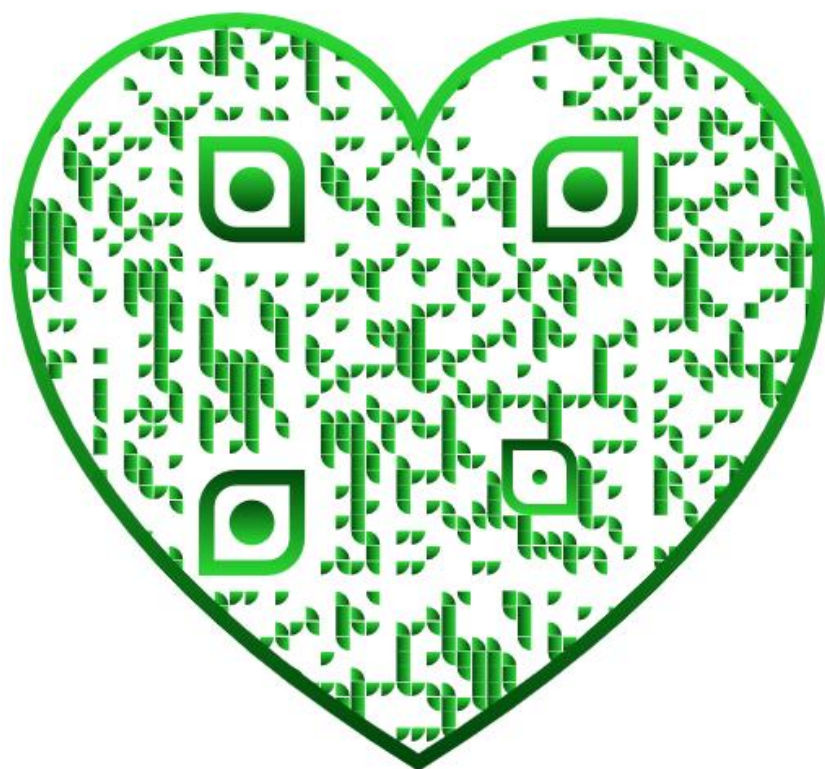


NOVEL
3

Written by
Rifujin na
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Illustrated by
Shirotaka





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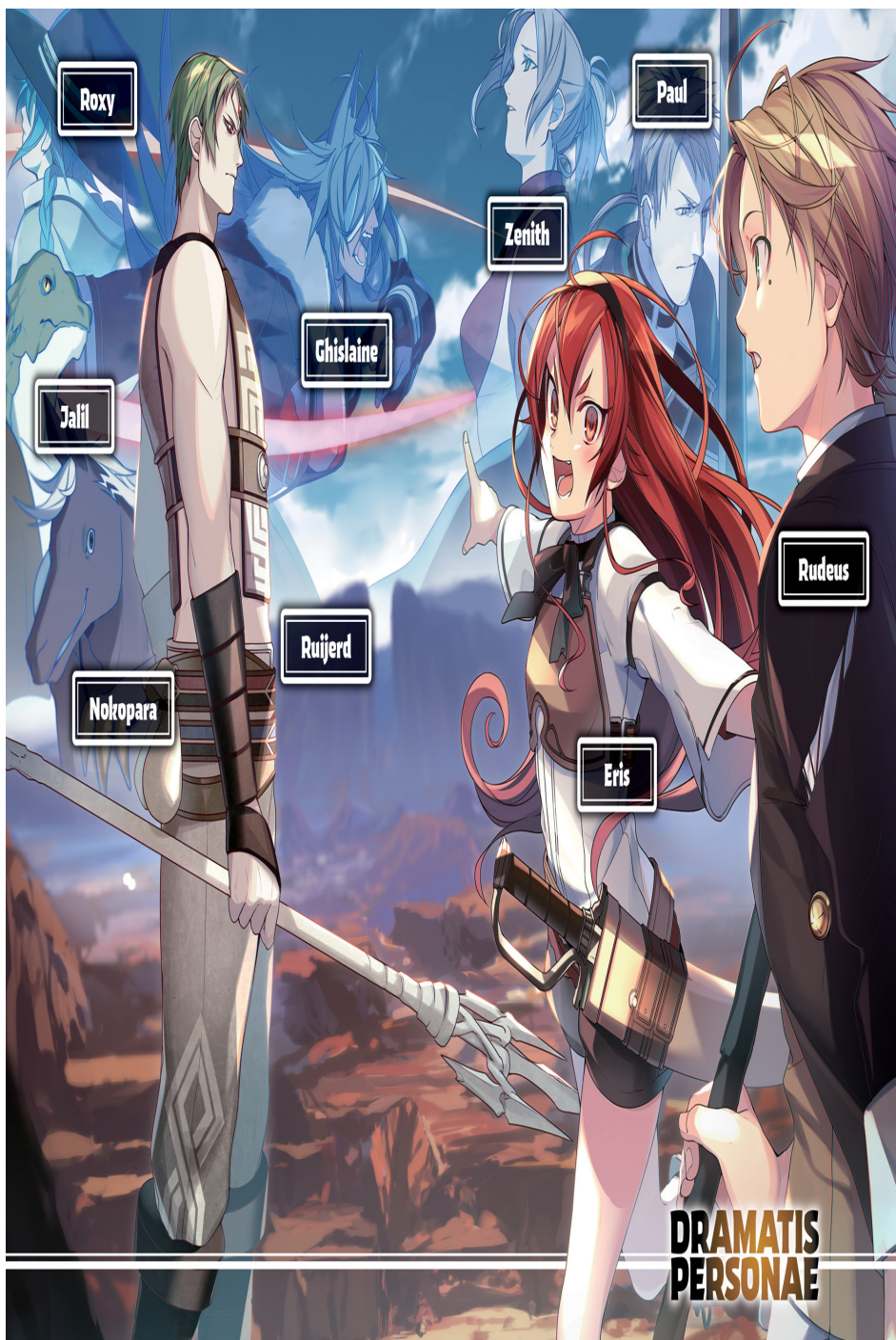
Mushoku Tensei

③ jobless reincarnation



WRITTEN BY
Rifujin na
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Shiroataka



Right away, I spotted
someone sitting near
the fire, whom I hadn't
noticed before.

But it wasn't Ghislaine.
It was a man.

“...”

He was staring at me,
still and silent, as if
to size me up.



Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

3

WRITTEN BY
Rifujin na
Magonote

ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka



Seven Seas Entertainment

MUSHOKU TENSEI
~ISEKAI ITTARA HONKI DASU~ VOL. 3

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VOLUME 3: BOYHOOD – ENTRY-LEVEL ADVENTURERS

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*"Some things I can do easily, but you can't do at all.
And some things you do effortlessly, I could never
manage.
That's all there is to it."*

—Look, getting a job is hard, okay?

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT

TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Chapter 1:

The Con Artist Who Claimed to Be a God

I was dreaming.

In this dream, I was soaring through the air, holding Eris in my arms. My mind was hazy, but somehow I knew that I was *flying*. The world around me was a constantly changing blur of shapes and colors. I rocketed through the air like a soundwave or particle of light, my body randomly bouncing in different directions.

I didn't know why this was happening. But I was certain of one thing: no matter what I tried, I was going to lose speed eventually, and plunge to the ground.

So I concentrated. I looked at the ever-shifting scenery below us, trying to find a relatively safe place to land.

Why did I feel the need to do this? Good question. Something inside me was just screaming that I *had* to, if I wanted to survive.

Still, we were going way too fast. It was like staring into the reels of a slot machine, except everything was moving much, much faster. Focusing more intently, I gathered magical energy into my eyes...and for just a moment, we suddenly slowed down.

Oh crap. I'm gonna fall.

Panic welled in my chest, but I could now see the land below me clearly. I needed to find a field. Falling into the sea or smashing into a mountain wouldn't be good. Forests were obviously dangerous, but if I managed to aim for a field...

I forced myself downward, hoping for the best. Our velocity slowed rapidly as I plunged toward a reddish-brown stretch of earth.

An instant later, I lost consciousness.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself in a pure white void. I

immediately knew this wasn't real. It had to be some sort of lucid dream. Yet, for some reason, my body felt oddly heavy.

“...Huh?”

I looked down at myself, and my eyes went wide. I was back in the old, familiar form I'd spent thirty-four years in.

At the sight of it, memories of my previous life came flooding back. I was the same bitter, vile, insecure, and selfish piece of trash I'd always been. The ten years I spent as Rudeus suddenly felt like nothing more than a dream.

A crushing wave of disappointment washed over me. I'd reverted to my pathetic, former self, and I found that fact all too easy to accept.

So it really was just a dream, huh...?

As dreams go, it lasted an awfully long time. But at the end of the day, it was too good to be true. I'd been born into a loving family, and managed to get friendly with some very cute girls. Not a bad ten years by any means. I'd wanted to enjoy that life a little more, though.

Oh well. Guess it's over now.

I could feel the memories of my time as Rudeus beginning to fade. Once you've woken up, even the best of dreams melt away in no time.

Had I really expected anything different? Please. A smooth, happy life like that was never in the cards for a guy like me.

Eventually, I noticed that a weirdo had appeared in front of me. The individual in question had a blank, white face, marked only by a big, wide grin.

Maybe *blank* wasn't the right word. I just couldn't make out any distinguishing features. When I looked at any specific part of that face, it slipped instantly out of my memory; my mind refused to form an image of the larger whole. It almost felt as if this...person, was being blurred out by a pixelated mosaic.

Still, I somehow sensed that I was dealing with someone calm and patient.

“Hey there. Nice to meet you, Rudeus.”

Hm. I'd been so busy feeling sorry for myself, and now I had some weird, censored-porno guy chatting me up.

Actually, that voice was pretty ambiguous. Could be a guy or a girl. Let's go with girl! That would make the pixelated thing feel kind of sexy, right?

“Hello? Can you hear me?”

Oh. Yeah. Sure. Hi there, nice to meet you.

“Excellent. Nice to see you're so polite.”

I didn't actually speak out loud, but it seems like my friend here heard my thoughts just fine. Might as well keep communicating this way.

“Wow. Nothing fazes you, does it?”

That's not true at all.

“Ehehe. Don't be so modest!”

So anyway. You're...who or what, exactly?

“Can't you see that much for yourself?”

I can't see much of anything with that mosaic. Uh, are you the Mighty Sperman or something?

“The Mighty Sperman? Who's that? Does he look like me?”

Oh, totally. He's a big blurry mess of pixels, just like you.

“Hmm. So there's someone like me in your world too...”

Well, no. Not really.

“What? Okay, let's just move on. I'm a god. The Man-God, specifically.”

Uh-huh. The Man-God. Right.

“You don't sound too impressed, I have to say.”

Uhm...just wondering why a god would be wasting time chatting with me, I guess. Isn't it a little late for you to be showing up anyway? The god's supposed to make his appearance way back in the first chapter, right?

“The first chapter...? What do you mean?”

Never mind, it's nothing. Please, go right on ahead.

“All right. Anyway, I've been keeping an eye on you for some time

now. You've been living quite the interesting life!"

Peeping's always lots of fun, isn't it?

"Oh, it's been a joy. And that's why I decided to take care of you."

You're taking care of me? Gee, thanks. Talk about condescending... What am I, your pet?

"Come now, there's no need to be so hostile! I'm only talking to you because I saw you were in some real trouble."

Well, that's a red flag. Anybody who pops up offering to fix all your problems when you're struggling is a conman.

"No, no. I'm on your side, friend."

Hah! Now we're friends? Don't make me laugh.

I met a few people like you in my old life, buddy. People who slithered up to me and said, "Just try your best," or, "I'll look out for you." They were all liars. They didn't really give a damn. They assumed everything would automatically work out once they lured me out of my room. None of them understood the source of the problem. Everything you say reminds me of them. I'll never trust you.

"Goodness, that's a problem. Hmm... Why don't I just offer you a little advice then?"

Advice, huh...?

"That's right. Feel free to ignore it completely, if you want."

Right. Got it. So that's your angle. I had plenty of that last time as well. People loved giving me advice. Thought they could feed me a bunch of feel-good self-help crap and get me focused on something other than my own misery. Seriously, talk about missing the point. What good is positive thinking going to do me now? I'm way past the stage where my emotional state's going to make a difference. Getting optimistic only sets me up for more pain down the line.

I mean, this right here's a case in point! Why even let me dream, damn it? Alternate reality my ass! I got all into this second chance at life, then you just pull the carpet out from under me? Did you have to be so damn sadistic?!

"Wait a second. I think you're misunderstanding things. I want to help you with your current life, not your old one."

...Hm? Why do I look like this then?

“That’s your astral form. It’s distinct from your actual body.”

My...astral form...?

“Right. You’re perfectly fine physically, of course.”

So, this is only a dream? When I wake up, I won’t find myself back in this crappy body?

“Exactly. Since you’re dreaming at the moment, you’ll be back to normal once you wake up. Feel better now?”

Phew. Okay. So this is all just some weird dream...

“Well, it’s not *just* a dream. I’m speaking directly into your mind right now. Hard to believe your mental image of yourself is so different from your body...”

Telepathy, huh? Well, all right. But what do you actually want with me? Do you plan to send me back to my old world? Since I don’t belong here or whatever?

“Don’t be ridiculous. I couldn’t send you anywhere outside the Six-Faced World, obviously.”

Hmph. Maybe that’s obvious to you, but I’m totally in the dark here.

“A very reasonable point.”

Wait a minute though. If you can’t send me back... you can’t be the one who reincarnated me in this world, right?

“True. Reincarnation isn’t really my department anyway. That’s the specialty of a certain wicked Dragon God.”

Hrm. We’ve got an evil dragon, too, huh...?

“Anyway, do you want my advice or not?”

...No thanks.

“Huh?! Why not?”

I don’t know what’s going on here, but you’re obviously a shady character. That means I’m better off ignoring you completely.

“Aw. Do I really seem that shady?”

Oh hell yes. You couldn’t act more like a conman if you tried. Reminds me of those scammers I used to run into playing MMOs. The instant you let yourself get into a conversation, they were already messing with your head.

“I’m not a conman! I won’t even ask you to *follow* my advice,

okay?”

That’s just another part of your strategy.

“Come ooooo! Trust me!”

You’re awfully whiny for a deity. Look. It’s not like I even worship you, whoever you are. The only god I care about is the one who actually made the miracle of my reincarnation happen. Why would I trust some other guy who pops into my head and says all sorts of weird crap? Oh, and people who talk about “trust” are always liars. Words of wisdom from one of my favorite books.

“C’mon, don’t be so stubborn. Just give me one little chance.”

Now you just sound like a loser ex-boyfriend trying to get back with the girl who dumped him. Look, buddy. How many prayers do you think I said in my former life? You never came to the rescue back then. Not even once, right up until the day I died. Why offer me advice now?

“I’m not from your old world, remember? I’m a god of this world, and I’m saying that I’ll help you out from now on.”

Right. And I’m saying I can’t trust you. Talk is cheap. If you want me to believe you, show me a miracle or something.

“This doesn’t count as a miracle? How many people do you know can communicate with you through your dreams?”

What’s so special about a little communication? Anybody can do that. You just write a letter or whatever.

“Well, true enough. But is that really a good reason for you to ignore me? At this rate, you’re going to die.”

...I am? Why?

“The Demon Continent is a rather harsh place. For one, there isn’t much of anything to eat. For another, it’s absolutely swarming with monsters, especially compared to the Central Continent. And I know you can speak the language, but things work rather differently here. Are you really confident you can survive?”

The Demon Continent? What? Hold on. You mean that huge lump of land way out on the edge of the world? Why would I be way the heck out there?

“You got caught up in a huge magical disaster. You ended up being teleported here.”

A magical disaster...? Are you talking about that light I saw?

"That's right."

So that was some sort of teleportation spell. Hmm.

...Wait, I'm not the only one who got hit by that thing. I wonder if everyone else back in Fittoa is all right. Buena Village is pretty far away from Roa, so it's probably fine... but I'm still worried about my family.

...You have any insight on that, buddy?

"Would you really believe my answer either way? You don't even want to listen to my advice."

Good point. You'd probably lie just for the fun of it.

"All I'm going to say is that everyone's praying for your safety. They all want you to make it back alive."

Well...sure. Of course they would.

"Hmmm. You really believe that? Isn't there a part of you that thinks...they might be glad to have seen the last of you?"

...Yeah, I'd be lying if I said the thought hadn't crossed my mind. By the end of my last life, nobody cared if I lived or died. And I've still got some self-esteem issues stemming from that.

"Well, people care about you in this world. You'd better make it back to them in one piece."

Yep. You're right.

"I won't make any guarantees, but I think you'll stand a very good chance of getting back alive if you do follow my advice."

Wait. Before we get to that, I want to know why you're doing this. Why do you care so much about me?

"Heavens, you're persistent... I just think things will be more fun if you stay alive, okay? Is that not good enough?"

People who only care about having fun tend to be total scumbags, you know.

"Is that how things were in your last life?"

Pretty much. I knew a few guys like that, and they all loved making other people dance like puppets for their own amusement.

"Hm. Well, I do enjoy a bit of puppetry now and again. I can't

deny that.”

And what could possibly be so “fun” about watching me anyway?

“Maybe that wasn’t the right choice of words. You’re very... interesting, that’s all. I hardly ever get the chance to see someone from an entirely different world! I’d like to help you meet all sorts of people and see what comes of it.”

Great. So I’m the pet monkey and you’re giving me some vague instructions to see if I can reach my goal. That sound about right?

“Sigh... Look here. You haven’t forgotten my original question, have you?”

What original question?

“Let me repeat myself then. Are you confident you can survive here? Stranded in a dangerous, unfamiliar land?”

...No. Not really.

“Then maybe you’d be better off hearing me out. Like I said before, it’s up to you if you want to follow my suggestions.”

All right. Fine. I get it. Go ahead, give me advice if you really want to. What was the point of this whole long-winded conversation anyway? You could’ve just told me what to do and saved us both a headache.

“Yes, yes. Now listen carefully, young Rudeus. Soon after you awake, you’ll see a man. Rely on him, and do what you can to help him.”

As these brief and final words echoed through the void, the blurred-out god abruptly disappeared.

Chapter 2: The Superd

When I woke up, it was already night.

A black sky full of stars stretched above me. Shadows cast by a flame danced across the ground. I could hear the crackling of burning wood. It seemed I was sleeping next to a bonfire, although I didn't remember making one, or even setting off on a camping trip.

The last thing I *did* remember...was the sky abruptly changing colors, and a wave of white light sweeping over us.

Oh, and then there was that dream. Not a very pleasant one...

"Gah!" A jolt of fear ran through me and I looked down at my body. Fortunately, it wasn't the slow, useless lump of flesh I used to inhabit. I was back in the young but strong form of Rudeus. Seeing that, my memories of the past began fading slightly, and a wave of pure relief washed over me.

To hell with that Man-God. For a minute there, I'd felt like I was back in the bad old days. Seemed like I was going to get a bit more time in this world after all. Thank goodness. I had a ton of things I still wanted to do here. Like cast aside my "Wizard" status, for one thing.

When I sat up, my back hurt; I'd been laid on the bare ground. My immediate surroundings were a stretch of dry, cracked earth. From what I could see, there was barely any vegetation at all. Were there even no insects? I heard nothing except the sound of the fire.

It really was quiet out here. I felt like any noise I made would be swallowed up by the total silence of the night. I couldn't remember having been in a place anything like this before; the kingdom of Asura was covered in grasslands and forests after all. Had that wave of white light done this?

No, no. According to the Man-God, I'd been teleported. This was the Demon Continent presumably. A completely new and unfamiliar land. Somehow, that light had sent me... Wait.

What about Ghislaine and Eris?!

My first instinct was to jump to my feet and start looking for them. But just as I began moving...I noticed a girl sleeping on the ground behind me, one hand clutching at my shirt.

Her vivid red hair was unmistakable. It was Eris. Eris Boreas Greyrat—the girl I'd been tutoring back in Fittoa. I'll skip the background story for now, but I'd been teaching her reading and arithmetic for three solid years at this point. She'd been a force of nature at first: spoiled, violent, and totally out of control. But I'd managed to navigate through some tricky events, such as rescuing her from would-be kidnappers and teaching her to dance before her birthday party. Eventually, I'd earned her respect and trust.

Of course, she still punched and kicked me on a daily basis. That was just the way she was.

"...Hm." For some reason, Eris had some sort of cloak draped over her. I'd just been laid out in my clothes, but...oh well. The principle of "ladies first" probably applied here.

My staff, Aqua Heartia, was also lying on the ground behind her. Eris had given it to me as a present on my tenth birthday only a few days ago. In any case, she didn't have any obvious external injuries. That was a relief.

Where's Ghislaine, though?

Ghislaine Dedoldia was both our swordplay instructor and Eris's personal bodyguard. She was a fearsomely skilled beastwoman who'd been teaching me the basics of her style in exchange for a rudimentary education. The woman's brain was allegedly "made of muscle," and she was definitely lagging behind Eris in her studies...but in an emergency like this, she'd be far more useful than the likes of me. It was possible she'd made the fire and put that cloak over Eris.

I turned away from my sleeping student, and started looking for my master. Right away, I spotted someone sitting near the fire, whom I hadn't noticed before.

But it wasn't Ghislaine. It was a man.

"..."

He was staring at me, still and silent, as if to size me up. I froze like a rabbit under a predator's glare.

Despite my shock, I tried my best to study the man calmly. He

didn't seem to be wary of us. If anything, it was more like...hmm. How could I put this? Something about his body language reminded me of the way my sister used to slowly, timidly approach a cat she wanted to pet.

Was he worried about frightening these children he'd stumbled across? That seemed to indicate he wasn't hostile.

But just as I was breathing a sigh of relief, my mind picked up on a few alarming details. His hair was emerald green, his skin porcelain white, and he had something like a red jewel embedded in his forehead. There was also a long scar running across his face. His eyes were sharp, his features stern; even at a glance, he looked like a dangerous man.

Just to drive the point home, there was a three-pronged spear lying by his side.

When I was very young, I'd been tutored in magic by a girl named Roxy who taught me many valuable, life-changing things. One of the things she'd taught me concerned a certain race of demons—the Superd. I remembered her words perfectly, even now.

Don't talk to the Superd. Don't go anywhere near them.

I wanted to spring to my feet, grab Eris, and start running wildly. But I managed to suppress that urge at the last moment.

The Man-God's advice had popped into my head: *Rely on him, and do what you can to help him.*

I had absolutely no reason to trust that self-styled deity, of course. Everything he said to me set off alarm bells, and now he'd left me here with this incredibly suspicious character. How *could* I trust him? This guy was a Superd for crying out loud. Roxy had explained in great detail just how terrifying and violent they were.

Maybe some sort of god wanted me to help him out. Okay, fine. But who was I going to trust here? Some shady character I met in a dream, or my beloved master, Roxy?

Roxy, obviously. The question wasn't even worth thinking about. Which meant I should be running away now.

Then again...maybe that was why the "advice" was necessary in the first place. If it weren't for that dream, I probably would've fled immediately. But even if I did manage to get away somehow, what would my next move be?

I glanced at our surroundings for a second time.

It was dark; everything was completely unfamiliar. And the cracked earth around me was covered in jagged rocks. If I took the Man-God at his word, this was the Demon Continent. That would mean I was a long way away from home.

Come to think of it...I'd had another odd dream earlier, although I'd almost forgotten it after that memorable chat with the Man-God. I'd been flying across this world at a ferocious speed. I swept past tall mountains, open seas, thick forests, and deep valleys...many places where I could have actually died. Maybe that hadn't been a dream; maybe I really had been teleported. The Demon Continent thing seemed increasingly plausible.

And of course, I didn't know *where* on the continent I was. If I ran off now, I'd be wandering aimlessly in the middle of a massive and foreign land.

In the end, I didn't have much of a choice. Even if Eris and I could get away from this man, we'd just end up hopelessly stranded in the middle of nowhere. Of course, there was always a chance that we'd find a village nearby when the sun came up. But was it worth gambling everything on that?

No. Of course not. I knew perfectly well how tough it was to find your way in unfamiliar country.

Calm down, man. Deep breaths. You don't trust the Man-God. Fine. But what about this guy? Look at him carefully. Look at the expression on his face. He's anxious. Anxious, and a little resigned. He's not some inhuman monster incapable of emotion, okay?

Roxy had told me to steer clear of the Superd, but she'd never actually met one herself. I'd learned all about prejudice and discrimination in my old world, and I knew how witch hunts happened. The Superds were feared, but maybe they were just misunderstood. Roxy surely hadn't meant to lie to me, but there was a chance she had the wrong idea.

My intuition told me this guy wasn't going to hurt us. He didn't look nearly as shady or malicious as the Man-God. Rather than Roxy's warning or the Man-God's advice, I decided to trust my own instincts. I didn't hate or fear this guy at first glance; his appearance was just a little...intimidating. In that case, it wouldn't hurt to talk. I'd make up

my mind based on how that went.

“Hello there,” I called to him.

After a pause, he responded with a brief, “Hello.”

So far so good. Hmm. What’s next?

“Are you a servant of god or something?”

The man tilted his head in puzzlement. “I’m not sure what you mean by that, but I found you two here after you fell from the sky. I know human children are delicate, so I made this fire to keep you warm.”

No mention of my faceless friend, huh? Was this guy not in on the divine plan? Based on what the Man-God said about his motives, maybe watching me was only half the fun. Seeing how other people reacted to me was probably just as interesting. In that case, this man really might be trustworthy.

“That was very kind of you. Thank you for helping us.”

“...Are you blind, boy?”

Now that was a peculiar question. “What? No, my vision’s perfect, actually.”

“Did your parents not teach you about the Superd then?”

“My parents didn’t, but my master did warn me to stay away from them at all costs.”

The man paused again, then spoke more slowly and carefully than before. “You’re disregarding your master’s words, you know.” The unspoken question, of course, was: *I’m a Superd. Are you really okay with that?* The man seemed surprisingly insecure. “Aren’t you afraid of me?”

Not afraid, no. But I am a little suspicious of you.

There was no need to say that aloud of course. “I think it would be impolite to fear a man who just helped me.”

“Hm. You say the strangest things, child.” There was a look of genuine bewilderment on his face now.

I didn’t think I’d said anything particularly odd, but maybe the Superd took it for granted that everyone would run screaming at the sight of them. I’d learned a bit about the Laplace War, the four-hundred-year conflict between humanity and demonkind that ended

only a century ago. I knew that the Superd had been shunned ever since it came to an end. The world was slowly shedding its prejudices against other types of demons, but the Superd were definitely a special case. Every other race seemed to loathe them as passionately as the Japanese people hated American soldiers during World War II. They were portrayed as something close to the embodiment of pure evil.

Without my knowledge of racism from my old life, I probably would have shrieked in terror at the sight of one.

The man said nothing. He tossed a twig into the fire and it popped loudly. Eris moaned at the sound and began stirring. She seemed on the edge of consciousness.

Wait. That's not good. She's definitely going to make a scene. I should at least introduce myself before things get totally chaotic.

"I'm Rudeus Greyrat. What's your name, sir?"

"Ruijerd Superdia."

Superdia was presumably the common last name used by all the Superds. That was how things typically worked with the demonic peoples. For the most part, only humans took family names, although there were a few eccentric exceptions among the other races. Likewise, Roxy's last name was Migurdia, according to the Dictionary of Demonkind she sent me during my stint as Eris's tutor.

"Well, Ruijerd, I think this young lady is going to wake soon. She can be very noisy at times, I'm afraid. Let me apologize in advance."

"No need for that. I'm used to it."

Given her aggressive approach to life, there was a real risk Eris might take a swing at Ruijerd the instant she laid eyes on him. We needed to have a quick conversation while we had the chance. Hopefully that would keep things from getting too hostile later on.

"Pardon me. I'm going to move a little closer." With a glance at Eris to make sure she wasn't waking up just yet, I scooted around the fire and settled down next to Ruijerd. Up close, I could make out his clothes in the faint, flickering light. His embroidered vest and trousers seemed like some type of tribal garb—the sort of thing an indigenous person might have worn.

Ruijerd seemed more uncomfortable than anything else. But honestly, that was much less off-putting than the Man-God's brand of

pushy friendliness. I said, "Not to change the subject, but where are we at the moment?"

"The Biegoya region, in the Northeast of the Demon Continent. We're not far from the old Kishirisu Castle."

"Oh. I see..." I'd seen Kishirisu Castle on a map once. It was a long, long way away from Asura. "Why did we land all the way out here, I wonder?"

"If you two don't know, I certainly wouldn't."

"Yeah, I suppose not."

I guess strange things can just happen when you're in a world with dragons and magic, but...

It didn't seem like a coincidence that we'd run into a major character like Perugius's lieutenant right before this happened. For that matter, it could be that the Man-God had played some part in things as well. If we'd been caught up in this by sheer coincidence, it was a miracle we were even alive.

"Well, in any case, I'm very grateful that you helped us."

"There's no need for gratitude. Just tell me where you hail from."

"We're from the Kingdom of Asura on the Central Continent. The city of Roa in the Fittoa region specifically."

"Asura...? That's certainly a far-off land."

"It certainly is."

"Not to worry though. I'll see you back there safe and sound."

The Northeast of the Demon Continent was on the opposite side of the map from Asura. In sheer distance, it was comparable to a trip from Paris to Las Vegas. And in this world, of course, you couldn't just hop on an airplane. Even sea travel was only possible on specific routes, so any intercontinental journey required lengthy detours over land.

"Do you have any idea what may have happened, boy?"

"Well, uhm...the sky started glowing all of a sudden, then someone who called himself Almanfi the Radiant showed up and told us he'd come to stop some sort of abnormality. We were still talking to him when this wave of bright, white light hit us. Next thing I knew, I was waking up here."

“Almanfi...? So, Perugius got involved? The situation must have been truly grave then. You’re lucky you were merely teleported.”

“True enough. If that had been some sort of explosion, we’d both be dead.”

I noticed Ruijerd hadn’t seemed too surprised by the whole Perugius thing. Maybe it wasn’t that unusual for our legendary hero to show up every now and again. “By the way, Ruijerd...have you ever heard of a Man-God?”

“Mangod? Doesn’t sound familiar. Is that someone’s name?”

“Never mind. It’s not really important.” It didn’t feel like he was lying to me, and I couldn’t imagine why he’d feel the need to.

“In any case...the Kingdom of Asura is it?”

“It’s all right, I wouldn’t ask you to take us all that way. If you could just escort us to the nearest town, I think we—”

“No. A Superd warrior never goes back on his word.” Ruijerd’s words were firm, his voice full of stubborn pride. It was enough to make me want to trust him, even putting aside the Man-God’s advice.

Right now, however, I needed to stay skeptical. “But we’re talking about a journey to the other side of the world.”

“Don’t worry yourself about that, child.” With that, the man reached out and timidly patted me on the head. I saw relief on his face when I didn’t jerk away from his hand.

Was this guy just fond of children maybe? Still, we weren’t talking about a ten-minute stroll back home here. I couldn’t exactly take his promises at face value right now...

“Think of it this way,” the man said. “Do you know the language here? Do you have any money? Do you know the roads?”

Oh. Huh. Hadn’t even occurred to me until now, but...I’d been speaking in the Human Tongue this whole time, and this demon man was responding fluently. Interesting. “I can speak Demon-God actually. And I’m a competent magician, so I can earn money for myself. If you take us to a town, I’ll find out where we need to go.” I wanted to steer this conversation toward a polite refusal if possible. Ruijerd himself might be trustworthy, but I didn’t like the idea of things playing out exactly as the Man-God wanted.

If my cautious words hurt him, the man didn't let it show. "I see. At least allow me to protect you then. Abandoning such young children would blemish the honor of the Superd."

"Well, I wouldn't want to disgrace such a proud people."

"Not to worry. We've already taken care of that ourselves."

I chuckled a little, and Ruijerd's lips curved upward slightly. Unlike the Man-God's hollow, disturbing grin, there was some genuine warmth behind his smile.

"In any case, I'll take you to the village where I'm staying tomorrow morning."

"All right."

I didn't trust that so-called god further than I could throw him, but this man was different. It couldn't hurt to give him a chance. Until we reached that village at least.

A little while later, Eris's eyes snapped open.

Sitting bolt upright, she looked around the area, her expression increasingly anxious. After a moment her eyes met mine, and I saw relief flash across her face.

An instant later, she noticed the man sitting next to me.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!" Shrieking like a banshee, Eris tumbled backward, then tried to get up and run. But her legs gave out under her and she collapsed to the ground. "Nooooooooooooo!"

The girl was in a state of total, blind panic. But she wasn't thrashing around violently, or even trying to crawl away. She just lay where she'd fallen, trembling in terror, wailing at the top of her lungs. "No! No, no, no! Please, please, no! Ghislaine! Ghislaine, help me! Ghislaine! Why aren't you coming?! Noooo! I don't want to die! I don't want to die! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Rudeus! I'm sorry I pushed you away! I'm such a coward! Now I'll never get to...k-keep my promise! Aaah...ah... Waaaaaaah!"

After carrying on for quite a while, the girl finally curled up into a ball and began bawling incoherently. Just watching her sent a cold

shiver down my spine. *I can't believe how terrified she is...*

Whatever else you could say about her, Eris was a strong-willed, confident girl. As far as she was concerned, the world was hers for the taking. She always tried to bulldoze through every obstacle in her path; as a general rule, the girl threw punches first and talked later.

Had I...gotten the wrong idea here maybe? Was running into a Superd *literally* a matter of life and death?

A bit unsettled, I glanced over at Ruijerd. "That's a more typical reaction," he said.

You can't be serious.

"So I'm the one who's behaving oddly here?"

"Yes, you're acting rather strangely. However..."

"However?"

"I can't say that I mind."

The man's face was a picture of loneliness. I felt a stab of genuine sympathy.

I got to my feet and walked to my cowering pupil. Eris twitched in fear as my footsteps drew closer; I squatted down next to her and began gently rubbing her back. It brought back memories from a different life, of a time when my grandma had comforted me in the exact same way. "Come on, it's okay. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Hic... Of course there is! Th-that man's a Superd!"

I still didn't entirely understand why she was so terrified, honestly. I mean, this was *Eris*—the girl who'd fearlessly attacked Ghislaine, an actual Sword King. I'd thought she wasn't afraid of anything.

"What's so scary about him though?"

"H-he's a *Superd*, stupid! They... They *eat* children! While they're still alive! Hic."

"Hm. I don't think that's true."

I turned back to Ruijerd for confirmation, and he nodded gamely. "We don't eat children, no."

Yeah, didn't really think so. "You hear that, Eris?"

"B-but... But they're demons! Demons!"

“Yes, that’s true. But he speaks Human just fine fortunately.”

“Look, that’s not the point, okay?!” Jerking her head up off the ground, Eris looked up at me with fire in her eyes.

Much better. Now that’s the Eris we know and love. “Hmm, you sure you want to stick your head up like that? Maybe he won’t eat you if you stay curled up on the ground.”

“Argh! S-stop making fun of me!” Clearly infuriated by my teasing, Eris shot me another glare, then whipped her head around to do to the same to Ruijerd...at which point, she started trembling again.

Were those actual tears in her eyes? Good thing she wasn’t standing up with her legs spread wide, the way she usually did. Her knees would probably be shaking like crazy.

“N-nice...to meet you, s-sir. I’m...E-Eris B-Bo-Boreas...Greyrat!”

Despite it all, the girl still managed to stutter out a polite greeting. It was a little comical, especially coming right after she’d glared daggers at him. Come to think of it, though, taking the initiative to introduce yourself was never a bad idea when you were speaking to a stranger. Someone had taught me that a long time ago.

“Eris Boboboreas Greyrat, is it? You humans have taken to giving yourselves some peculiar names of late, it seems.”

“No, no! It’s Eris Boreas Greyrat! I just stuttered a little, that’s all! Look, how about you introduce yourself, huh?!”

An instant after she’d finished shouting at him, Eris’s face went a little pale. Seemed like she’d forgotten who she was talking to for a second there.

“Of course. My apologies. I’m Ruijerd Superdia.”

When Ruijerd responded calmly, an expression of relief flashed across Eris’s face, then quickly gave way to a confident, cocky grin. It seemed she’d retroactively decided she wasn’t scared of him one bit.

“See? He’s not so bad. You can make friends with anyone, so long as you can communicate with them.”

“Yep! You’re right, Rudeus. Honestly, Mother’s such a silly liar!”

So she’d heard about the Superd from Hilda then? I was a bit curious about the stories she’d been told. They must have been pretty awful.

Eris's reaction was relatively understandable. I probably would've freaked out more than a little if I ran into a Teke or Namahage in real life, after all.

"What did Miss Hilda tell you about the Superd?"

"She always said they'd come to eat me unless I went to bed on time."

Ah, so they were the classic bedtime boogeyman in this world, huh? Kind of like the Putaway Man back in Japan. "Well, this Superd doesn't seem interested in eating us. We could brag about making friends with him once we make it back it home, right?"

"Oh. D-do you think Grandfather and Ghislaine would be impressed...?"

"Of course."

I glanced over at Ruijerd. There was an expression of mild surprise on his face. *So far so good*. "You know, I think Ruijerd's actually a bit of a loner. He'd probably agree to be your friend right away if you asked him."

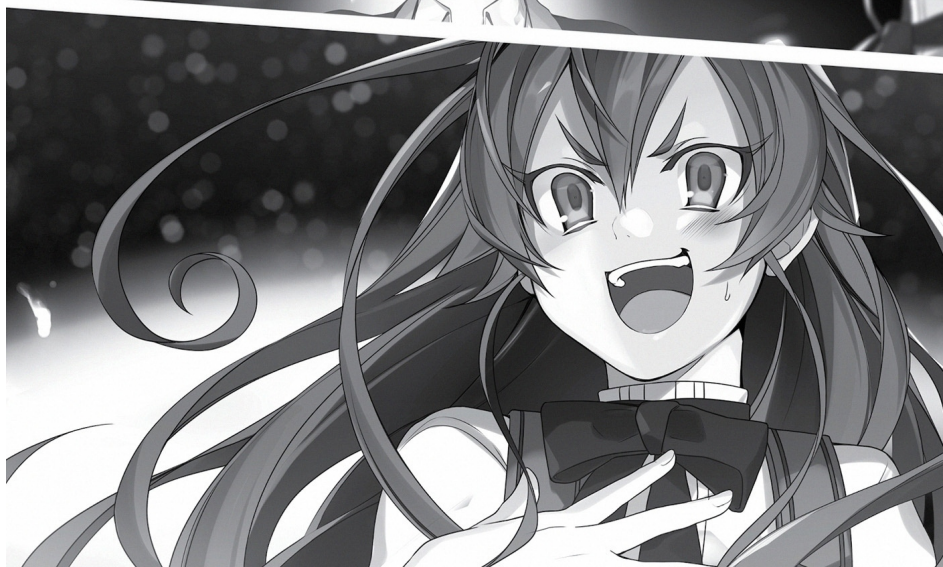
"B-but..."

I did feel like I'd put the matter in pretty childish terms, but Eris looked a bit hesitant. Come to think of it, she didn't really have any "friends" herself, did she? I was probably slightly outside that category for her...

No wonder she'd feel bashful then. The girl just needed a little push. "Isn't that right, Ruijerd?"

"Huh? Er, of course. I would very much appreciate it, Eris." It took the man a moment, but he took his cue eventually.

"W-well, if you insist! I suppose I'll be your friend!"



The sight of Ruijerd bowing his head to her was enough to break through the last of Eris's defenses. Everything was really so simple with her. It made me feel kind of ridiculous for overthinking things so much. Then again, I guess someone needed to compensate for her impulsiveness.

"Phew. Okay then. I think I'm going to get a little more rest, if you don't mind."

"What the heck, Rudeus? You're going to sleep already?"

"Yes. I'm tired, Eris. Very tired."

"Really? Well, that's a shame. Good night then."

I curled up on the ground, and Eris gently draped the cape she'd been lying under over me. Presumably it belonged to Ruijerd. For some reason, I really was completely exhausted.

Just as I was drifting off to sleep, I caught a few snatches of conversation from the direction of the fire.

"Are you not afraid of me anymore, girl?"

"I'm fine. I've got Rudeus with me."

Right. I'm going to get Eris home safe at least. No matter what.

With that final thought, I let myself sink into unconsciousness.

Chapter 3:

A Master's Secrets

Once again, I was dreaming. This time, I was watching a group of angels descend from the skies above. Seemed pleasant enough, compared to my recent nightmares.

Then I noticed that parts of the angels were hidden by pixelated mosaics. As they drew closer, they giggled at me in unison, and creepy grins spread across their faces.

The instant I realized this wasn't going to be a happy dream, I woke up.

"Another nightmare..." I'd been having many of those recently.

I sat up slowly and studied the barren, rocky field of earth in front of me. This was the Demon Continent—one half of the supercontinent that was torn apart in a war between humanity and demonkind, and home to the various demonic races once united by the Demon-God Laplace.

Its area was roughly half that of the Central Continent, but it was a harsher place by far. There was very little vegetation, for one thing. The terrain was scarred with cracks and fissures; changes in elevation were abrupt, with great rock slopes jutting up like steps on a giant staircase. Travelers would often find their path blocked by piles of boulders taller than a man. The place was basically a maze.

What's more, its dense, natural concentrations of magical energy meant it was plagued by numerous powerful monsters. From what I'd read, walking from one end to the other would take three times as long as a journey across the larger Central Continent. We had a very tough road ahead of us, and I wasn't sure how to break the news to Eris.

But when I looked over, I found her staring out at the bleak landscape with excitement shining in her eyes.

"Uhm, Eris. It seems we're on the Demon Continent, so—"

"The Demon Continent! What an adventure this is going to be!"

Was that *joy* in her voice? *Well, all right then. No reason to be a*

buzzkill and explain just how dangerous this is going to be.

“Let’s move,” said Ruijerd. “Follow me.”

Together, the three of us set out across the barren plain.

Apparently, Eris had made friends with Ruijerd while I was sleeping. She chattered away at him as we walked, describing her life at home, her lessons in magic, and her sword fighting practice with great enthusiasm. Ruijerd didn’t contribute that much to the conversation, but offered polite expressions of interest where appropriate.

It was hard to believe Eris had been utterly terrified of the man only the night before. At this point, she didn’t seem intimidated by him in the slightest. In fact, she made a few offhand comments that bordered on being outright rude. It made me more than a little anxious, but Ruijerd never seemed to take offense.

Who said the Superd had a terrible temper anyway? They were clearly full of it.

Of course, Eris wasn’t quite as prone to bluntly insulting people as she used to be. Edna and I had basically drilled that habit out of her, so she probably wasn’t going to blurt out anything too awful—or so I wanted to believe. Still, it was hard to know what might infuriate a stranger from an unfamiliar culture. I was really hoping she’d tread carefully here.

Also, Eris tended to get infuriated pretty easily herself, so... hopefully Ruijerd would do the same.

As that thought ran through my mind, I heard Eris’s voice grow sharp with irritation.

“Rudeus isn’t your older brother then?”

“Of *course* not!”

“But you share the name Greyrat. That is a family name, correct?”

“That doesn’t make him my brother!”

“Was he born to a different mother? Sired by a different father?”

“No, no. That’s not it, either.”

"I don't know how humans view these things, but you ought to be grateful that you have him."

"Look, you've just got the wrong idea!"

"Regardless, be grateful that you have him."

"Ugh..." Ruijerd had spoken firmly, and Eris faltered for a moment before finally giving in. "O-Of course I'm grateful..."

Not that we're really siblings, of course. Also, she's older than me.

The Demon Continent lived up to its reputation for rocky, steep terrain. The ground was also hard, dry, and dusty—more sand than soil. You could hardly blame the demons for starting a war to break out of this lousy place. There were barely any plants at all. Every once in a while I spotted a weird rocky thing that looked like some sort of cactus, but that was about it.

"Hm. Wait here for a moment. Don't move from this spot, you understand?"

Once every ten minutes or so, Ruijerd would order us to sit still and run off ahead. This time, he leapt easily across a series of massive boulders, quickly disappearing from view. The man's physical abilities were unbelievable. I'd always thought of Ghislaine as almost superhuman, but if you translated their raw agility into numbers, Ruijerd might actually come out on top.

Less than five minutes after his latest abrupt departure, he came hopping back to us. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Let's move on."

Ruijerd didn't explain himself, but there was a faint scent of blood on the head of his trident. Presumably, he'd cut down some sort of monster that may have blocked our way forward. From what I recalled of Roxy's dictionary, that jewel-like thing on his head acted like a radar of sorts. He was probably using it to identify potential threats before they got too close, then cut them down before they knew what hit them.

"Okay, look! Why do you keep running off like that anyway?" Eris asked, blunt as ever.

"I'm dealing with the monsters on the road ahead of us," Ruijerd

responded concisely. Parting his hair to the sides, he showed Eris the glinting red crystal at the center of his forehead. She flinched in surprise for just a moment; but the “jewel” was actually a rather pretty thing, and soon she was staring up at it with open curiosity.

“Oh, right. That must come in handy!”

“I suppose it does, but at times I wish I didn’t have one.”

“Well, I’ll take it if you don’t want it. C’mon, let me yank it off!”

“It’s not quite that easy, I’m afraid.” Ruijerd smiled a little.

Eris really had come a long way. She was even making jokes these days.

Uh. That was a joke, right?

“That reminds me, Ruijerd...I’ve heard the monsters on the Demon Continent are very strong.”

“They’re not so fearsome in this area. But we’re some distance from the main road, so they’re rather numerous.”

That seemed like a bit of an understatement actually. Ruijerd had been fighting monsters every fifteen minutes or so for a while now. Back in Asura, you could travel for hours by carriage without seeing a single one. True, the Kingdom’s knights and adventurers made regular efforts to exterminate any monsters within its borders, but even so, the encounter rate on the Demon Continent was absurdly high.

“You’ve been fighting all alone this whole time, Ruijerd. How are you holding up?”

“It’s not an issue. I cut these creatures down in a single strike.”

“Well, all right...but let me know if you’re getting tired, will you? I could watch your back at least. And I do know how to use healing magic.”

“Don’t worry yourself, child.” Ruijerd reached out and timidly patted my head again. He really loved doing that, didn’t he? “You just stay with your little sister and keep her safe, all right?”

“Listen! I’m not his little sister, okay?! I’m older than he is!”

“Hm. Really? My apologies.”

Ruijerd tried patting Eris on the head as well, but she slapped his hand away sulkily.

Better luck next time, big guy.

“Here we are.”

The walk had taken about three hours in total. We’d followed a long, winding path with a good bit of uphill climbing, so it took quite a while. But as the crow flies, we were only half a mile or so from where we’d started.

I was surprisingly worn out. I’d been feeling lethargic since the night before. Was this some sort of after-effect of that teleportation spell? Maybe I just needed to work on my endurance... It wasn’t like I’d been slacking off on my training with Ghislaine, though.

“Oh! It’s a town!” Eris exclaimed, studying the little settlement in front of us with great interest. The girl didn’t look even slightly winded. I was a little jealous of her stamina.

To my eyes, the place we’d arrived at looked more like a village than a town. There were maybe ten or fifteen houses at most, and the fence surrounding them was crude. I noticed a small field inside as well. It was hard to tell what they were growing, but from the looks of things, it wasn’t going to be a bumper crop.

Was it even possible to farm on land like this, without a river anywhere nearby?

“Halt!”

Just outside the front gate, we were stopped by a boy who looked like he belonged in junior high. His blue hair reminded me of Roxy. “Who are those two, Ruijerd?!”

The kid was speaking in the Demon-God tongue, but I could understand him well enough. My listening comprehension skills were apparently up to par.

“Remember the shooting star last night? That was them.”

“I can’t let such suspicious strangers into our village!”

“What’s so suspicious about them? Explain yourself.” Ruijerd’s face was suddenly stern, his voice threatening. If he’d spoken to me this way last night, I probably would have run for the hills without a second

thought.

“Wh-What is there to explain? Just look at them!”

“They’re the victims of a magical disaster that occurred in Asura. They happened to be teleported here, that’s all.”

“But... Look, even if that’s true...”

“What’s the matter with you? Would you really leave these children to their fate?”

At this point, I noticed Ruijerd was clenching his hands into fists. Acting on instinct, I reached out to grab his arm. “He’s just doing his job, Ruijerd. Please calm down.”

“What...?”

“Arguing with some flunky isn’t going to get us anywhere. Why don’t we ask him to go get someone with actual authority?”

The boy scowled at the word *flunky*, but Ruijerd nodded in agreement. “You have a point. Rowin, would you call for the elder?”

“Yeah. I was just thinking I might do that actually.” Rowin closed his eyes tightly. He then proceeded to stand there silently for the next ten seconds.

Uh...what is this? Are you going to get moving or not? Please don't tell me this kid just nodded off on the job... Hmm. Maybe he's waiting for a nice wet kiss?

“Uh, Ruijerd, is he...”

“The Migurd can converse with others of their race, even at a distance.”

“Oh. Now that you mention it, I think my master told me a bit about that.” To be specific, she’d written in her Dictionary of Demonkind that the Migurd were capable of telepathic communication with their close friends and family members. She also noted that she herself lacked this ability, and had left her village because of it.

Poor girl.

Come to think of it though...if this was a Migurd village, maybe mentioning Roxy’s name would be helpful? Then again, I didn’t know if she was connected to this specific place. There was also the chance it could backfire completely.

“The elder’s on his way,” Rowin said, opening his eyes at last.

“We could go meet him halfway, if—”

“You’re not taking a step inside this village!”

“Very well then.”

With negotiations at an impasse, we just stood there for a while. As the awkward silence stretched on, Eris tugged at my sleeve and whispered, “Hey, what’s going on?”

Oh, right. She doesn’t understand the Demon-God tongue. “The guard here thinks we’re suspicious, so we’re waiting for the village elder to come look us over in person.”

“What the heck? What’s so suspicious about us?” Furrowing her brow, Eris looked down at her clothes. She’d put on her usual sword-practice outfit for our trip outside the city; it was a little light, but didn’t strike me as odd compared to what Ruijerd was wearing. It wasn’t like she was wearing a frilly dress. “Uhm, should I be worried?”

“About what?”

“I don’t know. Just...in general.”

“We’ll be fine, Eris.”

“Well...okay then.”

Bold as Eris was, the prospect of an argument at the village entrance clearly made her more than a little anxious. My attempt at reassurance seemed to work at least.

“The elder seems to have arrived,” Ruijerd murmured after a moment.

I peered into the village and saw a bald man with a cane who looked weirdly youthful. He was walking toward us with two girls who looked like teenagers. None of them were particularly tall. Maybe the Migurd just stayed that height, even when they were fully grown.

There hadn’t been any mention of that in Master Roxy’s dictionary...but the girl she drew to illustrate the entry did look like a junior high school student. I assumed it was a self-portrait at the time, which was somewhat charming, but maybe she was just depicting a typical adult Migurd.

While I was pondering the matter, the village elder began conferring with Rowin a little way from our group. “These are the

children in question then?”

“Yes. One of them can speak the Demon-God tongue. It’s very strange.”

“Anyone could learn the tongue if they studied it, surely.”

“Why would such a young human child study our language of all things?!”

I had to hand it to Rowin. He kind of had a point on that one. Fortunately, the village elder just patted him gently on the shoulder. “Let’s not be too hasty, Rowin. Try to calm down, all right? I’ll speak with them.”

With that said, the little man began walking slowly toward us. For lack of a better idea, I bowed to him—a simple Japanese greeting, rather than the fancy one favored by the Asuran nobility. “Nice to meet you, sir. My name is Rudeus Greyrat.”

“Well, you’re certainly a polite one. I’m Rokkus, the elder of this village.”

I glanced over at Eris, trying to prompt her to follow my example. Apparently confused by the contrast between the man’s apparent youthfulness and his dignified bearing, she crossed and uncrossed her arms. It looked like she was trying to decide whether to assume her signature defiant pose.

“You should introduce yourself, Eris.”

“But...uh, I don’t know the language.”

“Just do it the way you learned. I’ll tell him what you’re saying.”

“Ugh... I-It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir. My name is Eris Boreas Greyrat.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Eris offered a textbook curtsy, just as she’d practiced in her etiquette lessons. The village elder’s face broke into a smile.

“Did the little lady here just introduce herself as well, son?”

“Yes. That’s the way you do it in our homeland.”

“Hmm. It wasn’t much like yours, though.”

“Well, the customs are different for men and women...”

Rokkus nodded thoughtfully at this, then bowed to Eris the same

way I'd bowed to him. "My name is Rokkus. I am the elder of this village."

A bit startled, Eris glanced over at me uncertainly. "What did he just say, Rudeus?"

"He's the elder of this village, and he's called Rokkus."

"Oh. R-really? So I guess he did understand you. That's good." Eris smiled in obvious relief.

That probably covered the initial formalities. It was time to get down to business. "Would you permit us entry to your village, Rokkus?"

"Hrm..." Rather than answering my question at once, the little man began studying me intently from head to toe.

Ooh! Such a passionate gaze! Cut it out...you're making me want to do a striptease...

After a long moment, his eyes came to a stop, fixed on my upper chest. "Where did you obtain that pendant you're wearing, young man?"

"It was a gift from my master."

"And who was this master of yours, if I might ask?"

"Her name was Roxy." The honest answer felt like the way to go here. At the end of the day, I was proud to have studied under her.

"What was that?!" Rowin shouted. Before I could respond, he rushed right past Rokkus to grab me by the shoulders. "D-did you just say Roxy, boy?!"

"Yes. That's my master's name..."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ruijerd balling his hands into fists. Turning my head to meet his gaze, I shook my head slightly. There wasn't any anger on Rowin's face, only anxious excitement. He wasn't going to hurt me.

"Where—where is Roxy now?!"

"Well, I haven't seen her in some time myself, but..."

"Please! Tell me anything you know! Roxy... Roxy is my daughter!"

Sorry, come again?

"Uhm, I'm not sure I heard you correctly. Could you repeat that."

“Roxy’s my daughter! Tell me, is she still alive?!”

Pardon, monsieur? Uhm, no, I think I heard you fine the first time actually. Just feeling a bit curious about your age. The man didn’t look old enough to be in high school even. If you told me he was Roxy’s little brother, I would have believed you. But apparently...hmm. Yeah. Interesting.

“Please, just tell me! It’s been more than twenty years since she left this village, and we haven’t heard a word from her since!”

So Roxy had basically run away from home. Not that she’d mentioned anything about that to me of course. *Honestly, master, must you be so secretive?*

Wait. More than twenty years ago? Uh...how old would that make her?

“Well? Why aren’t you saying anything?!”

Whoops. Sorry about that, buddy. “Uhm, right now she’s...”

Halfway through my sentence, I realized the man still had a death grip on my shoulders. It sort of looked like he was trying to squeeze the information out of me, didn’t it? That was no good. I didn’t want anyone thinking I’d broken under pressure...not quite this easily at least. I mean, if he’d smashed my computer, beaten me up, then barraged me with insults, that’d be a different story. I needed to stick up for myself a bit here. It might make Eris anxious otherwise.

“Actually, I want you to answer a question for me first. How old is Roxy right now?”

“What? Why does her age matter? Can you just—”

“It’s very important. Oh, and while you’re at it, I’d also like to know how long the Migurd live.”

Yeah. This was definitely something I needed cleared up.

“Uh...fine. Roxy would be...forty-four this year, I suppose. And we live around 200 years, for the most part. Unless some disease kills us first.”

Huh! We’re the same age! That makes me kind of happy actually.

“You don’t say. Hmm. By the way, would you mind letting go of me?”

Rowin finally released his grip on my shoulders.

Okay. Now we can talk.

“As of six months ago, Roxy was in the Kingdom of Shirone. I wasn’t there in person, but we were exchanging letters for a while.”

“Letters? Can she write in the Human tongue?”

“Yes. She knew our language perfectly by the time I met her. That was seven years ago.”

“R-really? In any case...you’re saying she’s all right?”

“Well, there’s always a chance she came down with some sudden illness recently. But as far as I know, she’s in perfectly good health.”

Rowin sank unsteadily to his knees. There was undisguised relief on his face, and tears were shining in his eyes. “I see... So she’s all right. She’s all right! Haha... Thank goodness...”

Hey, I’m happy for you, Dad. I found myself thinking of Paul, wondering if he might react similarly when he learned I was safe. I’d have to send a letter to Buena Village as soon as I could.

Turning away from Roxy’s weeping father, I addressed Rokkus again. “Now that we’ve cleared that up...would you be willing to let us inside?”

“Of course. We wouldn’t turn away someone who brought us such welcome news.”

Good thing I had this pendant. Never would’ve thought it’d come in so handy.

I probably could’ve saved myself some time by showing it to them right away. But then again, depending on how the conversation went, they may have gotten the impression that I killed Roxy and stole it from her. Demons apparently had long lifespans, and it probably wasn’t uncommon for them to look much younger or older than they really were. In other words, my appearance wouldn’t necessarily protect me from suspicion here—especially if they realized my mental age was more like forty-five. I’d have to do my best to act appropriately childish.

For now, at least, we’d managed to gain entrance to the Migurd village.

Chapter 4:

The Foundations of Trust

If I had to describe Roxy's former village in one word, it would be *destitute*.

There were less than twenty households. It was a bit hard to describe the buildings themselves; it looked like they just dug down into the earth then covered up the hole with something that resembled a turtle's shell. It was obvious at a glance that the architectural techniques in use here weren't nearly as advanced as those of the Asura Kingdom. Then again, even if you brought a crew of Asuran builders out here, they probably wouldn't have managed to make anything better—there didn't seem to be any lumber to work with after all.

The little field I'd spotted from outside the gate was lined by neat rows of wilting, leafy plants. In all honesty, it looked like they were all half-dead. Somewhat concerning. The Dictionary of Demonkind hadn't included much detailed information on agriculture unfortunately. All I could remember was a brief mention that their vegetables tended to be "bitter and unpleasant."

Apart from the crops themselves, there were also some alarmingly toothy flowers growing at the very edges of the field. They bore a strong resemblance to the deadly plants known to lurk inside green pipes in a certain video game series; but it seemed plausible that these were actually some sort of animal, given the way they audibly gnashed their ugly, uneven fangs together. Presumably they'd been placed there to protect the crops from hungry animals.

Near the village fence, a group of young girls moved busily around a fire. It looked like a bunch of junior high kids out on a camping trip, but they seemed to be focused on cooking a single enormous meal. Apparently they made their meals in one big pot and then distributed shares to all the villagers.

There were almost no men around. I did notice a few children who were ostensibly boys at play, but other than Rowin and the elder, the adults were all women. The others were presumably off securing tomorrow's dinner. From what I remembered, men did most of the

hunting in these villages, while the women looked after their homes.

“What sort of prey is there to hunt around here, Ruijerd?” I asked.

“Monsters,” he replied.

That answer was probably perfectly true, but it felt *slightly* lacking in detail—like a fisherman telling you he caught “fish” for a living.

Oh well. Guess I'll just have to press a little harder. “Uhm... Do those shells on top of their houses come from monsters too?”

“Those come from Great Tortoises. Their shells are tough, and their meat’s delicious. You can even make bowstrings from their tendons.”

“Are those the hunters’ main targets then?”

“Yes.”

A tasty tortoise, huh? It was a little hard to picture one massive enough to fit these shells. The one covering the village’s biggest house had to be at least sixty feet long.

As that thought ran through my head, Ruijerd and Rokkus stepped into that very building. One thing never seemed to change, no matter where I ended up: the guy in charge always had the nicest house.

“Pardon me.”

“Th-thank you for having us.”

Mumbling some vaguely polite words, Eris and I went in as well.

“Whoa...”

The interior of the dugout was much more spacious than I would’ve guessed from the outside. Its floor was covered with furs, and the walls were decorated with colorful works of art; a fire blazed in a sunken hearth at the center of the room, lighting the interior quite nicely. There were no separate rooms or dividing walls; at night, you probably just wrapped yourself up in a fur and curled up by the fire. I noticed a number of swords and bows placed carefully near the outer walls. You could certainly tell this was a community of hunters.

For some reason, the two girls who’d followed the elder to the gate didn’t follow us inside.

“Well then, let’s hear your story,” Rokkus said, plopping himself down next to the hearth. Ruijerd took a seat directly facing the elder; I

sat cross-legged next to the Superd. I glanced back, looking for Eris, and found her standing awkwardly near the entrance, unsure of what to do.

“Do we just sit on the ground? Even inside the house?”

“We sat on the floor all the time during sword practice, didn’t we?”

“H-hmm. Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Eris wasn’t the type to get too flustered about this sort of thing really. She was probably just thrown off by the difference between how things worked here and what she’d learned in her etiquette lessons. Watching her drop down to the ground, I found myself slightly concerned that the girl might completely forget the concept of “manners” by the time we made it back home.

Shaking my head slightly, I turned back to face Elder Rokkus.

I started off by stating my name, age, profession, and place of residence, then explained that Eris was my pupil and the daughter of a noble family. I also made it clear that we’d been sent very suddenly to this continent by events beyond our control.

I decided against mentioning the whole Man-God thing. I had no way of knowing how the Migurd viewed that particular deity, and the last thing I needed was to brand myself as the messenger of an evil god.

“...Well, there you have it.”

“Hrm,” Rokkus murmured, stroking his jaw with the thoughtful expression of a junior high kid pondering some tricky algebra problem. “I see...”

As we waited for him to make a decision, I noticed Eris beginning to nod off. She’d looked energetic enough a few minutes earlier, but maybe the hike had taken its toll after all. It wasn’t really surprising—this sort of travel was new to her, and it seemed she’d never gone back to sleep the previous night. The girl was probably running on fumes.

“Eris, I can handle the talking,” I said. “Why don’t you take a nap?”

“...How am I supposed to do that?”

“You just wrap yourself up in one of the furs, I think.”

“But there aren’t any pillows.”

“Hey, my lap’s available,” I said, slapping my thighs with a smile.

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you can rest your head on my legs.”

“...Really? Well...thanks.”

Normally, Eris would have kicked up a royal fuss at the very suggestion, but it seemed she was too drowsy to care. Without much hesitation, she plopped her head in my lap. For a moment, her face tensed and she clenched her hands into fists, but once she closed her eyes, she was sound asleep within seconds.

The girl must have been seriously exhausted. I took the opportunity to gently stroke her long, red hair, and she squirmed a little as she slept.



After a moment, I realized that Rokkus was watching me from across the hearth. There was a warm, amused smile on his face. I couldn't help feeling a little self-conscious. "...Uhm, what is it?"

"You two certainly seem to get along."

"Oh. Yes, absolutely."

That said, we were still in "hands-off" mode for now. The little lady here had some firm ideas on the subject of chastity, and I wasn't about to disrespect that.

"In any case...how are you planning to make your way back home?"

Hmm. He'd gone straight to the same question Ruijerd had brought up the night before. "We'll travel on foot, earning money as we go."

"You think a pair of children can earn enough to support themselves?"

"Actually, I'm planning to handle that part on my own." Not that I was exactly street-smart myself, but I couldn't very well expect a sheltered, little rich girl like Eris to deal with the practical realities here.

"They won't be alone," Ruijerd interjected. "I'll be going with them."

Hmm. It would definitely be reassuring to have this guy in our corner, but the Man-God thing was still a point of concern. No matter how much I *wanted* to trust him, it was probably better for us to go our separate ways at this point. For all I knew, he was a ticking time bomb.

That said...how exactly was I supposed to turn down this offer?

Before I could think of anything, Elder Rokkus voiced his own disapproval. "And what purpose would that serve, Ruijerd?"

"What do you mean?" Ruijerd replied with a frown. "I'm going to keep these two safe, and bring them back to their home."

Rokkus sighed. "But you can't enter any towns, can you?"

"Uh..."

Wait, what? He can't...go into town?

"Think about what might happen if you approached a city with

these children. You remember what happened a hundred years ago, don't you? When the garrison chased you off and formed a squad to hunt you?"

...A hundred years ago?

"Well, yes..." Ruijerd stammered. "But...I could just wait by myself outside..."

"And know nothing of what befalls these two within? That's no way to keep them safe," Rokkus said, shaking his head in exasperation.

Ruijerd grimaced and ground his teeth.

Apparently, the Superd were just as feared and hated on the Demon Continent as they were in Asura. Had they really formed an entire squad just to hunt down a single man? That seemed...somewhat excessive. You'd think he was some rampaging monster.

"If anything should happen to them inside..."

"Yes? What would you do?"

"I'd go in to rescue them, even if I had to kill everyone living in the city." The man's eyes were deadly serious. He wasn't even exaggerating; I could tell he meant every word literally.

"There's no reasoning with you when children are involved," the elder murmured. "Come to think of it...you first earned our trust by rescuing some youngster from a vicious monster, didn't you?"

"True."

"Has it already been five years since then? Ah, how the time does fly..."

Sighing, Rokkus shook his head wearily. I knew the man was currently on my side, but I found myself a little irritated anyway. He just gave off the same aura as an obnoxiously precocious junior high kid expressing his exasperation at the stupidity of adults.

"In any case, Ruijerd—do you really think you can accomplish your goal by such violent means?"

"Hm," Ruijerd grunted, creasing his brow.

His goal? This sounded important, so I decided to butt in. "Your goal? What's that, Ruijerd?"

"It's very simple," said Rokkus. "He wants to convince everyone

that the Superd aren't the wicked monsters they're made out to be."

With effort, I managed to keep myself from blurting out, "Well, that's not going to happen." Systematic prejudice wasn't the sort of thing a single person could overcome, no matter how hard they tried. Hell, a single kid can't even stop their class from bullying someone, and hatred of the Superd had apparently spread across the *entire world*. I mean, even bold little Eris screamed at the sight of Ruijerd. Humanity and demonkind alike were positive that his race was evil; how were you going to convince them *all* otherwise?

"Uhm, well...it's true that the Superd attacked friends and enemies alike during the war, right?" I ventured tentatively.

"Wait! That wasn't—"

"I know rumors can get out of control, but it does seem like there's a good reason everyone's afraid of—"

"No! That isn't true!" Ruijerd shouted, suddenly grabbing me by the front of my shirt; his eyes were burning with anger.

I felt myself trembling. *Oh crap...*

"We were victims of Laplace's plot! The Superd are no race of monstrous beasts!"

Wh-what the heck? Stop yelling at me, man. You're freaking me out. Crap, I can't stop trembling. What's this about a plot anyway? Is this guy conspiracy theorist or what? And this Laplace guy lived, like, 500 years ago, right?

"U-uh, what did this Laplace do exactly?"

"He repaid our loyalty with betrayal!"

Ruijerd's grip on my shirt began weakening. I reached up and tapped his arms a few times, silently asking him to release me; he complied immediately. Still, I could see his hands shaking with fury. "That man... That cursed man!"

"Would you mind telling me the whole story, Ruijerd?"

"It's a long tale."

"Well, I've got plenty of time."

The story Ruijerd proceeded to tell me described a hidden side of this world's history.

The Demon-God Laplace was known as a hero who united the demonic races, winning them the rights humankind had long denied them. The Superd had rallied to Laplace's banner very early in his campaign. They possessed outstanding agility and a capacity to sense the presence of their foes. In addition, their strength in battle was second to none. They served as one of Laplace's personal forces, specializing in ambushes and nighttime raids. Thanks to the "third eye" on their forehead, they were always aware of their surroundings. It was impossible to take them by surprise or to avoid their deadly attacks.

In other words, they were an *elite* group. At the time, the word "Superd" was spoken in tones of respect and awe throughout the Demon Continent.

But then came Laplace's War.

In the middle stages of the conflict, just as the demons were beginning their invasion of the Central Continent, Laplace called upon his warriors bearing a certain type of weapon—one that would later come to be known as the Devil Spears. He offered these spears to his soldiers as gifts. They closely resembled the tridents the Superd wielded in combat, but they were jet-black in color; even at first glance, there was clearly something ominous about them.

Naturally, some among the warriors objected to their use, insisting that a Superd's spear was their heart and soul—that they could never cast aside their weapons for some cursed thing. But this was a gift from Laplace, their master. In the end, Ruijerd—the group's leader—ordered his soldiers to use their new spears, out of sheer loyalty to Laplace.

"Hm? Did you just say Ruijerd?"

"Yes. I was the leader of the Superd warriors at the time."

"...How old are you right now?"

"I lost track after I reached 500."

"Uh, okay..." Had Roxy's dictionary mentioned anything about the Superd being *that* long-lived? Well, whatever.

In any case, the group stuck their old spears in the ground

somewhere or other, and began to use the Devil Spears in battle. These new weapons were enormously powerful; they amplified their bearers' physical capabilities several times over, nullified the effects of the humans' magic, and heightened the Superds' already sharp senses even further.

The Superd were now nearly invincible. But in exchange, they were gradually transformed. The more blood their new spears tasted, the more corrupt their souls grew.

The warriors didn't even realize what was happening to them. They lost their sanity in increments, none more quickly than any other, and so, no one noticed how they, or those around them, were changing.

In time, this led to tragedy.

The Superd lost the ability to distinguish between their friends and their foes, and began to attack everyone they encountered indiscriminately—young and old. They showed no mercy to women or even children. They showed no mercy to anyone at all.

Ruijerd still remembered those days with vivid clarity. Before long, demonkind at large came to call the Superd traitors to their cause, and word spread among the humans that they were "bloodthirsty devils."

At that time, Ruijerd and his companions smiled happily at these insults, taking them to be the highest praise. The Superd were surrounded by enemies, but their cursed spears made them a force to be reckoned with. Every warrior in their band now fought with the strength of a thousand men; no army could hope to destroy them. They quickly became the single most feared combat unit in the entire world.

However, that didn't mean they suffered no losses. Now a hated enemy of both humanity and demonkind, they were forced to endure near-constant battles, day and night. Slowly but steadily, their numbers began to decrease.

Still, none of them questioned the path they were following. In their madness, the thought of death in battle brought them bliss.

After some time, a rumor reached the Superd band that one of their villages was under attack—Ruijerd's home village, in fact. It was a trap meant to lure them to their doom, but by this point, none of them were clearheaded enough to suspect anything.

The warriors returned to their home for the first time in a while... and proceeded to attack it.

It was simple. They'd found people, which meant they had to kill them.

Ruijerd murdered his parents, his wife, his sisters, and finally his own child. Ruijerd's son was still young, but he'd been training to become a warrior. It was far from an even fight, but in his final moments, the boy managed to break his father's jet-black spear.

In that instant, Ruijerd's pleasant dream ended, and his nightmare began. There was something hard and crunchy in his mouth. Realizing that it was his son's finger, he spat it out in horror.

His first thought was of suicide, but he forced it from his mind. There was something he simply had to do before he could die—an enemy he had to destroy, no matter the cost.

By this point, the Superds' village was totally surrounded by a demon army sent to exterminate them. Only ten of Ruijerd's soldiers remained. When they first received the Devil Spears, this had been a band of nearly 200 daring, valiant fighters. Now a bare handful survived, and they were all in rough shape. Some had lost an arm, others an eye or the jewel on their forehead; but even battered, bruised, and utterly outnumbered, they stared belligerently at the thousand-strong force surrounding them.

They were all going to die. And they were going to die in vain.

Ruijerd snatched the Devil Spears from his companions' hands and broke them apart. One by one, the others came to their senses, and their aggressive glares gave way to expressions of shocked disbelief. Many began to weep uncontrollably, lamenting their murder of their families. Still, none asked to be returned to the oblivion of their trance; they were made of sterner stuff than that.

Together they swore an oath to have their vengeance on Laplace. Not a single one blamed Ruijerd for what had transpired. These were no longer mindless killers, nor proud warriors; they were fallen, ruined creatures, with only revenge to live for.

Ruijerd didn't know what had become of the other ten, but he suspected they were dead. Without the power of the Devil Spears, the Superd were nothing more than unusually effective soldiers. They had no choice but to use whatever tridents they could find, rather than the

familiar ones they had grown used to over years of battle. By all rights, none of them should have survived. Somehow, Ruijerd managed to break through the enemy's encirclement and escape. But he was badly wounded in the battle, and spent the next three days and nights on the verge of death.

The one and only thing he'd carried with him was his son's trident—with which the dead boy had broken the Devil Spear and saved his father.

In the end, after several years spent in hiding, Ruijerd did get his revenge. As the three heroes battled the Demon-God Laplace, he jumped in to assist them, managing to score a blow on his hated enemy.

But of course, the defeat of Laplace wasn't enough to undo all the damage he'd done. Despised and persecuted, the surviving Superd were driven from their villages and scattered across the world. To help them escape their pursuers, Ruijerd was forced to kill more of his former demon allies. In those first years after the war, the attacks on his people were truly brutal, and he fought back just as viciously.

At this point, Ruijerd hadn't met another Superd in nearly 300 years. He didn't know if his kind had been wiped out entirely, or if they'd managed to survive and form a new village in some secret location.

"Laplace was to blame for all of this, of course. But I, too, bear responsibility for the disgrace I brought upon my people. Even if I am the last of my kind, I want to tell the world the truth."

With his story told, Ruijerd fell silent once again.

His words had been simple and blunt. He never appealed to our emotions. And yet, Ruijerd had conveyed his regret, anger, and bitterness perfectly. Either all of it was true, or the man was an astonishingly talented actor.

"What an awful story," I mumbled, trying to gather my thoughts.

If we took Ruijerd at his word, the Superd weren't some inherently bloodthirsty tribe. It wasn't clear why Laplace had given them the Devil Spears, but maybe he'd been planning to use them as a

scapegoat for any crimes committed by his armies once the fighting reached an end.

What a vile thing to do.

The Superd had clearly been deeply loyal to Laplace. They would've given their lives at his request. Betraying them so cruelly just seemed *unnecessary*.

"All right. I'll help you as much as I can."

A little voice inside me whispered an objection: *Are you really in a position to be helping him? How about you focus on saving your own skin? This trip's going to be way tougher than you think.*

It wasn't enough to keep my mouth from moving. "I don't have any real ideas, but maybe having a human child on your side will open up some new possibilities."

Of course, I wasn't acting solely out of pity or compassion. We did stand to gain from this arrangement, in some respects. Ruijerd was a powerful fighter—in the same class as the three legendary heroes—and he was offering us his protection. At least with him around, we wouldn't get killed by some random monster on the way to our next destination.

His presence would make things easier on the road, and more difficult when we reached a city. So long as we found some way to work around the city issue, he'd make an excellent ally. Not only was he strong, it was impossible to ambush or sneak up on him, even at night; that would make it much easier for us to avoid thugs or pickpockets in unfamiliar towns.

Also...though this was just intuition on my part, I got the sense the man was basically incapable of telling a lie. It *felt* safe to trust him.

"I'll do what I can for you, Ruijerd," I said. "That's a promise."

"Uh...thank you," he replied, looking more than a little surprised. Maybe he'd noticed the suspicion in my eyes fading away?

Well, whatever. I decided to trust you, all right? I fell for it, hook, line, and sinker.

In my previous life, I used to laugh off sob stories all the time... but for some reason, this one really hit home for me. If the man was tricking me somehow, so be it. I felt like being stupidly trusting for once.

“But my boy, the Superd truly are—”

“It’s all right, Rokkus. I’ll figure something out.” Ruijerd would protect us on the road, and I’d protect him in the cities. This would be a give-and-take relationship. “Let’s set out tomorrow, Ruijerd. Glad to have you with us.”

There was only one thing about this arrangement that made me feel a little anxious...

Namely, it felt like I was doing exactly what the Man-God wanted.

Chapter 5:

Three Days to the Nearest Town

The next morning, as the three of us were leaving the village, I spotted Rowin standing at his post by the gate.

“Good morning. Are you on guard duty again?”

“Yes. I’ll be out here until the hunting party returns.”

The other men of the village still hadn’t shown up since yesterday. Had Rowin been out here all night, like some NPC guard from an RPG? That always seemed like a pretty simple job...just standing in the same place all day, never moving an inch. Still, was he seriously going to be handling this all alone until the others got back?

Oh, I guess there’s Elder Rokkus. In a village this small, he probably has to pitch in too.

“Are you leaving already?” Rowin asked.

“Yes. We managed to talk things through last night.”

“Ah. I was hoping to ask you more about my daughter, but...”

“Ordinarily I’d love to talk, but I’m afraid we need to get on the road soon.”

“Right...”

The man was clearly disappointed. The feeling was mutual. I would’ve loved to hear some embarrassing stories from Roxy’s childhood.

“If I see her again, I’ll make sure to tell her to get in touch with you.”

“Please do,” Rowin said, bowing his head in gratitude. I’d have to make a mental note about this. “Oh, that reminds me! Wait just a minute.”

He ran into the village and into one of the houses—presumably Roxy’s childhood home. After several minutes, he emerged with a girl who bore a striking resemblance to my master. At first I wasn’t sure why he hadn’t just used telepathy to call her outside, but then I noticed

that he was also carrying some sort of sword. Were they giving us a present?

“This is my wife.”

“Nice to meet you. My name is Rokari.”

Ah. So this was the mom of the family then? “I’m Rudeus Greyrat, ma’am. I have to say, I didn’t expect Roxy’s mother to be so young.” I found myself bowing slightly. I owed these two a great deal, in a sense: they raised Roxy, and without her, I probably wouldn’t have set out into the world the way I did.

“Oh my, what a flatterer. I’m 102 years old, you know?”

“Uhm, well...that’s still young in my book.” Apparently, the Migurd reached physical maturity by age ten or so, and didn’t visibly age until they hit 150. “I owe Master Roxy a great deal, ma’am.”

“Master...? Goodness, it’s hard to imagine that girl teaching anyone much of anything. She must have changed a great deal....”

“She taught me all sorts of things. I’m very grateful to her.”

At this, Rokari blushed a bit and murmured, “Goodness.” Seemed like she’d gotten the wrong idea somehow.

“In any case,” Rowin said, “I’m glad you showed up when I happened to be on duty.”

“Yes. I’m very glad to have met you both as well. Roxy did so much for me, really... Hmm. Maybe I should call you Dad?”

“Hahaha... No. Don’t.”

Ouch. The man didn’t even crack a smile. His poker face reminded me a bit of Roxy’s. Made me a little nostalgic.

“All jokes aside, I do want you to have this,” Rowin said, holding out the sword. “I know Ruijerd’s with you, but you’ll sleep better if you have a weapon of your own.”

“I’m not exactly unarmed really,” I said, accepting the sword and drawing it from its sheath.

The blade was wide, single-edged, and only about sixty centimeters long. It was also slightly curved, like a machete or a cutlass. A few dings suggested that it had been in use for many years, but the cutting edge itself wasn’t chipped at all. It sure looked like they’d taken good care of this thing; it was clean, beautiful even. But there was also

something oddly threatening about it. Maybe it was the way the dull grey steel glowed faintly green when it caught the light.

“We got this from a blacksmith who wandered into the village quite some time ago. It’s a sturdy thing. Even after years of usage, the blade’s still perfect. It’s yours if you want it.”

“Thank you very much,” I said. “We’ll gladly take it.” This was no time to be modest. Right now, we needed all the help we could get. I could fight just fine as I was, but Eris could certainly use a weapon. She’d trained in the Sword God style after all; it’d probably make her feel less anxious to have a sword, even if she didn’t need to use it.

“Here’s a bit of cash as well. It’s not much, but it should cover two or three nights in a decent inn at least.”

Ooh, we got some pocket money!

I opened the pouch in excitement and found that it contained some coins of rough stone and a few made of dull grey metal. From what I recalled, currency on the Demon Continent consisted of green ore coins, iron coins, scrap iron coins, and stone coins. Their value was lower than the equivalent currencies elsewhere in the world; even the green ore coins, which were the most valuable, were only worth an Asuran large copper or slightly less. The iron coins were pretty close to coppers.

If we said one stone coin was worth one Japanese yen, the currencies would probably look something like this:

Asuran gold coins: 100,000 yen.

Asuran silver coins: 10,000 yen.

Asuran large coppers: 1,000 yen.

Asuran coppers: 100 yen.

Green ore coins: 1,000 yen.

Iron coins: 100 yen.

Scrap iron coins: 10 yen.

Stone coins: 1 yen.

At a glance, those numbers should make it clear just how powerful

and prosperous a kingdom Asura was, especially in comparison to the poverty of the Demon Continent.

Of course, the Demon Continent had its own economy, so prices weren't always comparable. It wasn't like everyone here was starving.

“...Thank you very much.”

“I only wish we could have talked about Roxy a little longer,” Rokari murmured, echoing Rowin's earlier words.

They certainly seemed to be worried about their daughter. Even if the girl was forty-four by now, in human years that was basically... twenty or so. It was understandable enough.

“I guess we could stay another day, if you like...”

Rowin shook his head. “Don't worry. We know she's all right now, and that's what matters. Right, dear?”

“Yes. She always had a tough time here, I'm afraid. We were rather worried.”

I could see how it'd be tough living in a little place like this without that telepathic power everyone else seemed to have. In general, you didn't really hear the sounds of conversation in this village. Everyone was probably communicating silently using their minds. Roxy couldn't participate in those conversations, or even overhear what others were saying to each other. It was small wonder that she ran away from home.

“Well, all right then. I hope we meet again someday.”

“Sure. But if we do, try not to call me Dad, all right?”

“Hahaha. R-right, sure.” *I get the message, man...*

It was hard to know when or if I'd see Roxy again, but at the very least, I'd have to repay them for the money someday.

Evidently, the closest town was a three-day journey on foot.

Not long after we set out, it became clear how crucial an asset Ruijerd really was. The man had been traveling the area on his own for many years now; he knew all the roads, and he knew exactly how to set

up a proper camp. Not to mention his biological “radar,” which alerted us to incoming threats well in advance.

It was ridiculously convenient to have him around.

“Ruijerd, would you mind teaching us about the things you’re doing?”

“Why?”

“So we can make ourselves useful.” Given the long journey ahead, Eris and I were both in need of a crash course in basic camping skills.

Fortunately, Ruijerd proved a willing enough teacher. “Let’s start with making a fire. Unfortunately, the Demon Continent doesn’t have any wood suitable for the purpose.”

Hm. Our first meeting had been around a campfire, so there was obviously some other way, but... “Is there something else you use instead?” I asked.

“Yes. We burn parts of a certain monster.”

“Ah.” That should have been my first guess honestly. Out here, almost everything you needed to survive seemed to come from hunting monsters.

“Fortunately, there’s one close nearby. Wait here for a moment, boy.”

“Wait, Ruijerd!” The man was already turning away, but I managed grab his shoulder before he could run off.

“What is it?”

“Were you going to fight it by yourself?”

“Of course. Hunting is warriors’ work. The children stay behind.”

Okay. So he was apparently planning to keep doing things this way forever. To be fair, the man had been alive for more than 500 years...we weren’t even old enough to be his great-great-grandchildren. And he was probably more than strong enough to handle all the fighting by himself.

Still, there was always a chance something could go wrong. If Ruijerd died or somehow ended up unable to fight, Eris and I would be forced to fend for ourselves. And right now, we had no real-world combat experience to speak of. What was going to happen if we lost him while our party was traveling through a deep, dangerous forest...or

in the middle of a battle with a fierce group of monsters?

I didn't like our odds of surviving in a situation like that. We needed to get some experience now, while we had the chance.

It'd be nice if I could convince Ruijerd to teach us how to fight, but...

No. That wasn't the right way to think about this. This was a give-and-take relationship; we were partners on equal footing, working together to achieve our goals. All three of us needed to figure out how to fight as a party.

"Okay, but we're not just children."

"Yes you are."

"Uh...look, Ruijerd." I had to be firm and clear about this. The man was still under the impression that he was our guardian; he needed to understand that wasn't the case. "We're helping you, and you're helping us. Our goals are different, but we're going to fight together... So all three of us are *warriors*, right?"

With the sternest expression I could muster, I met Ruijerd's gaze directly and waited for a reply.

It only took ten or fifteen seconds for him to make a decision. "... Very well. You're warriors then."

I can't say the man sounded particularly convinced, but at least he was going to let us tag along from now on. That was the important thing. "Hear that, Eris? You're going to fight, too, aren't you?"

Eris blinked with surprise, but managed to stammer out an "O-of course!" and vigorously nodded her head. *Good girl.*

"All right then, Ruijerd," I said, returning to my usual demeanor. "Can you lead us to this monster, please?" There was no point acting all aggressive anymore. You had to be forceful when you were negotiating, that was all.

The first enemy we faced as a group was a monster known as a "Stone Treant."

Treant, in general, was a term for tree-like monsters. These were

typically ordinary plants that had sucked up too much magical energy and mutated into violent creatures.

There were a considerable variety of specific monsters that fell into this broad category. First, you had the Lesser Treant, found all over the world. These were mutated saplings that tended to imitate ordinary trees until a target wandered into striking distance. They were weak and slow enough that an average adult with no real training could chop one apart without too much difficulty.

However, if a Lesser Treant happened to absorb enough nutrients from one of the Fairy Fountains located throughout the Great Forest, it would eventually mature into an Elder Treant. The highly concentrated magical power of the Fountains granted these monsters the ability to use various water spells.

There were also Old Treants, which were already massive before they mutated, and Zombie Treants, trees that transformed after they withered...among many others. Of course there were distinct differences between all these varieties, but their basic patterns of behavior were very similar. They pretended to be normal trees and attacked anyone who came too close. After some time, they produced seeds that grew into more of their kind.

The Stone Treant was something of a special case, though. It actually disguised itself as a *rock*.

You might be wondering how a tree could pull off that bit of camouflage. The answer was simple actually: Stone Treants had mutated into monsters back when they were still seeds. They could stay in their seed form even as they grew enormous, and were capable of abruptly transforming into tree-monsters whenever someone got too close.

In their normal form, they were completely inconspicuous. They didn't have a distinctive shape like a sunflower seed—at a glance, they really did look like lumpy, vaguely potato-shaped boulders.

“Is there anything we should keep in mind while we're fighting this thing?”

“Hm. You're a magician, yes?”

“That's right.”

“Don't use any fire spells then.”

“Oh. Would they not work on it?”

“We can’t use the thing for firewood if you burn it to a crisp.”

“Ah, right. Of course.”

“No water magic, either.”

“Because we don’t want the wood getting damp?”

“Exactly.”

Okay then. As far as Ruijerd was concerned, this thing was clearly less of a threat and more of a living piece of lumber. That meant it posed no real danger to us so long as we were with him. We could fight it without much actual risk.

“All right then. Let’s try having Eris and me fight for now. Ruijerd, you just step in to help out Eris if she’s in danger, okay?”

“Is there a point to keeping me in reserve?”

“I just want to see how well Eris and I can handle ourselves in a real battle. After this one, we’ll watch you in action and see what we can learn.”

“Very well.”

With that settled, I put us in a simple battle formation—Eris up in front, and me all the way in the rear. It seemed like the best choice, given her sword fighting skills.

I was a little hesitant to put my adorable little pupil on the frontlines, of course, but she wasn’t going to be much use held back in the middle of a formation. That sort of position was all about supporting your frontliners, and Eris was terrible at that sort of teamwork. Also, Ruijerd probably wouldn’t need much in the way of backup anyway. We’d be best off letting Eris fight freely, with Ruijerd and myself following up to support her.

“Okay, Eris. I’m going to soften it up with one good hard shot from a distance. After that, you move in and finish it off. I’ll try to at least call out the names of the spells I’m using, but if things get hectic I might not have the time. Just keep that in mind, okay?”

Eris nodded energetically, giving her new sword a few experimental swings. “No problem!” The girl was clearly raring to go.

I lifted my staff and paused to think things over. Fire and water spells were out, and just looking at the thing, wind didn’t seem like it

would be too effective. That left me with earth. Earth was fine by me. I'd gotten pretty good with it after all those figures I'd made.

Still, this was the first time I was fighting an actual monster. Better give this my all.

Closing my eyes, I drew a single, deep breath, then channeled my magical energy to and through my hands. It was something I'd done tens of thousands of times by now; at this point, I could have cast spells with both my legs cut off.

"All right..."

Projectile: Bullet-shaped rock.

Toughness: As hard as possible.

Shape: Snub-nosed, with multiple grooves.

Modifications: High-speed rotation.

Size: Slightly larger than a man's fist.

Velocity: As fast as possible.

"Stone Cannon!"

As the words left my mouth, a rock shot from the end of my staff with a ferocious bang. It zipped forward in a nearly perfect horizontal line, and smashed into the camouflaged Stone Treant that lay in wait ahead of us.

With an ear-splitting sound, the monster blew apart into tiny pieces. I'd killed it *extremely* dead.



Eris had already started running forward, but after my attack landed, she stopped in her tracks and turned to glare sulkily in my direction.

“What happened to softening it up, Rudeus?! Am I supposed to chop up the corpse?!”

“S-sorry. I’ve never done this before either, you know? I guess I used too much force...”

“Ugh! Get it together!”

Eris wasn’t exactly pleased that I’d ruined her first real battle, but I seriously hadn’t expected to kill the poor thing quite that easily. All I’d really done was tweak the standard Stone Cannon spell by making the projectile a bit more like a hollow-point bullet. People back home on Earth sure came up with some nasty stuff...

At this point, I noticed that Ruijerd was gazing at me as well. Or at my staff, to be more precise.

“Is that weapon some sort of magical implement?”

“No, it’s just a staff. A very high-quality one, though.”

“But you didn’t recite an incantation or use a magic circle...”

“Right. It isn’t possible to change the shape of the projectile if you use the incantation, so I just skip that part.”

“...I see.” At this point, Ruijerd fell into a thoughtful silence. The man may have been around for more than 500 years, but it seemed like silent spellcasting wasn’t something he’d seen too many times before.

“In any case...is that your magic at its most powerful?”

“Well, no. I could also make that projectile explode when it hit the target.”

“Hmm. I think it might be best to refrain from using your spells when the enemy’s close to your allies, Rudeus.”

“Uh, yeah. Good point.”

This was the first time I’d actually hit something with that spell, but it was definitely...more destructive than I’d expected. Even grazing someone with it might kill them instantly. Ideally I would’ve switched over to some support-type spell, but nothing really came to mind. Up till now, I’d only really thought about fighting on my own.

How did other magicians approach their role in combat anyway?

“Ruijerd, if I wanted to support you two with my magic, what sort of things should I be doing?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never fought alongside a spellcaster before.”

Well, whatever. We had a seasoned Superd warrior on our side. We didn’t need to imitate the way normal parties did things. I could think about getting us coordinated later; for now it was more important that Eris and I got some real combat experience.

“Okay... I hate to impose, but would you mind finding us another enemy?”

“Very well. There’s something we need to do first, however.”

“Oh? What’s that?” Maybe this was the part where we said a little prayer for the creature we’d slain?

“We have to gather the wood. You scattered it all over the place.”

Using wind magic, I proceeded to gather up the shattered pieces of the Treant.

Our party kept moving until the sun set, fighting a total of four battles. We faced another Stone Treant, a Great Tortoise, an Acid Wolf, and a group of Pax Coyotes.

Ruijerd brought down the Great Tortoise with a single attack. He just ran right up to the thing and jabbed his trident up through its skull. His movements were beautifully fluid and efficient. The man had been in the solo monster-hunting business for 500 years, and it really showed. I felt a little stupid for having gotten smug over blowing up a single Stone Treant.

Acid Wolves were large canines that could spit some kind of caustic fluid from their mouths. We only ran into one, so Eris took it down, stepping forward sharply to send its head flying with a single slash. Compared to Ruijerd, it wasn’t exactly elegant, but it was still an instant victory.

Unfortunately, the wolf’s blood sprayed all over Eris, so she wasn’t in any mood to celebrate. I was concerned that its blood might be

dangerous as well, but apparently that wasn't the case. She'd done well enough, given that it was her first real battle. According to Ruijerd at least.

On that note, I took out the second Stone Treant in one shot. I was hoping to deal some moderate damage so Eris could get more practice in, but it proved surprisingly tough to make my spell less lethal. Until I got the hang of moderating its power, I'd have to avoid using it on people. Even if I needed to kill someone, there was no need to make it gruesome.

The Pax Coyotes were our final encounter of the day, and the most challenging. These monsters tended to come by the dozens. They weren't exactly "pack animals," though—a single coyote formed its own group by reproducing through division, almost like an amoeba. Thankfully, it wasn't like new ones would constantly pop out in the middle of battle. They could only reproduce once every few months or so. Even so, any given group would steadily swell in size over time, with all the new coyotes under the complete control of their leader. If that leader happened to fall in battle, a different coyote would instantly assume its position. Their strength was mostly in their sheer numbers, but their perfect coordination and discipline made them genuinely dangerous.

The group we fought numbered about twenty. They probably could've killed any run-of-the-mill adventurer, but Eris faced the challenge cheerfully, swinging her new sword to and fro as Ruijerd offered a steady stream of advice. The girl had never put her life on the line in battle before today, but she didn't look particularly tense. All that practicing with Ghislaine had clearly imbued her with quite a bit of confidence, and it seemed like the act of killing didn't bother her much.

For my part, I just hung back and watched as Eris cut down one coyote after another. I'd been planning to step in and help if necessary, but Ruijerd was playing his supporting role so flawlessly that it might have been counterproductive. Still, doing nothing was pretty boring, and I started to feel a little left out after a while. Coming up with some way for us to fight as a group definitely needed to be my top priority.

In any case...Eris really was a remarkable fighter. She'd reached the Advanced level in the Sword God style just before my birthday, right? At this point, I probably didn't stand a chance against her unless I was using magic. Heck, even Paul was only an Advanced level

swordsman...although he'd reached that rank in all three styles, and had much more real-life combat experience. Still, Ghislaine said Eris had more raw talent than Paul ever did. She'd probably leave him in the dust in no time.

Eat it, old man.

"Rudeus! Over here!"

At some point, they'd finished off the last of the monsters; Ruijerd was taking out his knives as I approached. "Pax Coyote pelts are valuable. We were fortunate to find such a large group. Help me skin them."

But I had something else to attend to first. "Hold on just a second."

Walking over to Eris, I found her panting for breath...and wounded in three distinct places. Less than thirty minutes had passed since the battle began, but with Ruijerd devoting himself to his backup role, it had fallen to her to actually kill the vast majority of the monsters. Of course she'd be exhausted.

Couldn't hurt to get those injuries dealt with now at least... *"Let this divine power be as satisfying nourishment, giving one who has lost their strength the strength to rise again—Healing."*

"Thanks."

"Are you all right, Eris?"

"Hah! Of course! I barely even broke a—mgh."

That smug grin of hers looked a little gruesome with monster blood all over her face, so I wiped some of it off with my sleeve. The experience hadn't shaken her in the slightest. That was...pretty impressive. Personally, I was about ready to puke just from the smell.

"Hmm. No sweat, huh? That was your first real battle ever, you know."

"So what? I know how to fight. Ghislaine taught me everything."

Right, right. Practice like you play, and play like you practice. Eris always absorbed every word of Ghislaine's lessons. Maybe it wouldn't be that surprising if she could apply everything she'd learned in actual battle.

I mean, if you focused on fighting just like you'd been taught,

what difference did it make if your enemies actually bled?

“Good grief...” With a wry smile, I turned away and headed back over to Ruijerd, who’d been watching us the whole time.

“Why did you have Eris do all the fighting, Rudeus?”

“I won’t always be there to protect her. I want to make sure she can fend for herself when things get ugly.”

“Ah, I see.”

“On that note...what do you think of her so far?”

Ruijerd nodded thoughtfully before he spoke. “If she applies herself, she’ll be a master swordswoman some day.”

“Really?! All right!” Eris literally jumped into the air, her face shining with joy.

It had to feel pretty good hearing something like that from a legendary warrior. I didn’t mind hearing that either; if Ruijerd recognized Eris’s talents as a warrior, we stood a much better chance of finding some way to work as an actual team.

“Okay then, Ruijerd. From now on, let’s have Eris fight in the front while I hang back in the rear.”

“And what should I be doing?”

“You don’t have a defined position, so move around freely and cover our blind spots. Oh, and if either of us get ourselves in danger, take charge and tell us what to do.”

“Understood.”

For the moment, we had our basic combat formation worked out. Hopefully it would allow Eris and myself to get some more combat experience under our belts over the next couple of days.

Next up came camping practice.

For dinner, we had Great Tortoise meat. There was far too much of it to eat in one sitting, so we started off by drying most of it out for later—under Ruijerd’s direction of course.

To be blunt, the stuff was somewhat vile. Its scent was overpowering and it was painfully tough to boot. Apparently the normal approach was to soften it up in a simmering stew for hours, but Ruijerd opted for the quick and easy route of roasting it over a roaring fire.

At least the fire itself wasn't too hard to get going. Stone Treants evidently dried out very quickly after they died, so we didn't need to leave our wood sitting in the sun or anything. No wonder Ruijerd saw those things as walking lumps of lumber.

"...Guh." Honestly, though, this meat is seriously vile. Who said this stuff was "delicious" anyway?

Wait, that was totally you, Ruijerd. You're so full of it! I mean... maybe if you covered up the smell with ginger, it might be sort of edible? Maybe? Man, do I ever want some beef right now. And rice...

A memorable line from a certain manga floated through my mind: "Grilled meat is glorious. And it's glorious because it's tasty." Truer words were never spoken. Meat that isn't tasty isn't glorious in the slightest.

In retrospect, I'd eaten very well in the Kingdom of Asura. Bread may have been the staple food back there, but they usually complemented it with meat, fish, vegetables, and some sort of dessert, with all the variety of some three-star restaurant. And I'd spent most of my time there way out in the sticks; wasn't a spoiled little princess like Eris going to have an even harder time adjusting?

When I looked over, though, I found her gnawing away contentedly at her own chunk of meat.

"Hey, this isn't half bad."

Wait, seriously?!

Well...maybe it made sense. When you give a kid who's only eaten healthy stuff their first taste of junk food, they always go crazy for it, right?

"What?" Eris said as I stared at her.

"Uh, it's nothing. You enjoying that?"

"Yeah! I always...mnggh...wanted to try something like this!"

I knew Eris loved listening to Ghislaine's stories of life as an adventurer. Maybe that had translated into fantasizing about eating

tough, nasty meat around a campfire? Kind of a weird fantasy, but okay.

“It’s even edible raw, you know,” Ruijerd commented.

Eris’s eyes sparkled with curiosity, and a little chill ran down my spine. Fortunately, I managed to speak before she could open her mouth. “The answer’s no. Don’t even think about it.”

For crying out loud. Do you want worms? Because that’s how you get worms.

Ruijerd was giving Eris a lesson on basic weapon upkeep before we turned in for the night. For lack of anything better to do, I listened in.

Ruijerd’s spear wasn’t made of metal, and Eris’s sword was forged from special materials in a very specific way. Apparently neither of them needed to worry about ordinary rusting. But that didn’t mean they could skip their daily maintenance. Leaving dried blood on a sword or spear would gradually dull their edges and attract other monsters. From Ruijerd’s perspective, it was also your fundamental responsibility as a warrior to take good care of your weapon.

“Come to think of it, what’s that spear made of anyway?” I asked, suddenly curious. Judging from the one Ruijerd carried, the Superd tridents were pure white, totally unornamented, and on the short side for a spear. From the looks of it, the whole thing was made of a single substance; I couldn’t see any seam between the shaft and head.

“It’s made of me.”

“...Say what?”

“The spear of a Superd is made out of their soul.”

Damn. I hadn’t been expecting such a...philosophical answer.

Okay, sure. Right. So your spear is, uh, your soul. And your soul is your way of life, right? Your way of life is whatever lies in your heart...and your heart is just what you love. So basically, you love your spear passionately...or something?

Luckily, Ruijerd elaborated before I could get myself too tied up in

knots. "Every one of us is born with their own spear, you see."

The Superd were born with a three-pointed tail. It grew with them until they reached a certain age, at which point it would stiffen up and fall off. Yet even when separated, it was still somehow part of their body; the more they used it, the sharper and more deadly it would grow. With enough time and effort, these tridents could become peerless weapons, virtually unbreakable and capable of piercing through pretty much anything.

"...And that's why we mustn't cast aside our spears until the day we die." Ruijerd's face was full of bitter regret at the mistake he'd made four centuries ago.

By this point, his spear was probably harder and sharper than any other Superd's in the world. I was definitely glad we had him on our side.

Still, his outlook on the world...worried me sometimes. The man was as rigid as his weapon. If you can't bend a little sometimes, you'll never learn to accept other people as they are. And that means they'll never accept you either. There's such a thing as being *too* principled, you know?

In any case...after three days of fighting monsters and camping under the stars, our little party managed to reach the nearest town.

Chapter 6: Infiltration and Impersonation

The city of Rikarisu is one of the three largest settlements on the Demon Continent. At the time of the Great Human-Demon War, it served as a home base for the forces of the Demon Empress Kishirika Kishirisu. Even now, it is sometimes referred to as Old Kishirisu Castle.

The first surprise it has in store for first-time visitors is its unusual location. Rikarisu sits in the middle of an enormous crater, the rim of which forms a single continuous wall around the city. In times of war, these natural defenses helped the city to ward off many enemy sieges—and today, they still serve to protect the city against marauding monsters.

At the very heart of the city stand the ruins of Castle Kishirisu, half-destroyed during the events of the Laplace War. Imposingly thick outer walls surround the broken black-and-gold castle itself, a sight that offers visitors a constant reminder of the Empress's faded glory and demonkind's violent, painful past.

Rikarisu is a storied city. A place rich with history.

And when the sun sets, visitors will come to appreciate its true beauty.

—Excerpt from *Wandering the World*
by the adventurer Bloody Kant

Those words were the sum total of what I knew about the city of Rikarisu, which we'd now arrived at.

There were only three entrances to the city, all of which were cracks in the rim of the crater. The walls of the crater were surprisingly tall. Unless you could fly, it'd be difficult to make your way over them.

A pair of armed guards were stationed outside each of the entrances. They evidently took their security seriously here.

I shot a thoughtful look over at Ruijerd.

“What is it, Rudeus?”

“Ruijerd...we *can* get into this city, right?”

“I’ve never set foot in it myself. They always chase me off.”

Humankind feared and loathed the Superd on an almost primal level. That much had been obvious just from Eris’s initial reaction. I’d been hoping it might be a little different with other demons, but...based on what I’d heard back in the Migurd village, that was probably just wishful thinking.

“Just curious, but what does chasing you off usually involve?”

“The guards start shouting at me when I approach. Before long, large numbers of armed adventurers come running out.”

Okay, so we probably weren’t going to get a chance to explain ourselves. The guards would probably just scream, “Halt,” then call for backup...at which point we’d be crushed under a massive wave of burly men.

“In that case, I guess we’d better go with some sort of a disguise.”

Ruijerd shot me a sharp look. “A disguise?”

Hm. Was that going to be an issue? “Look, hear me out. For the moment, our top priority is just getting inside, right?”

“I’m not objecting. I just don’t know what you mean by a... disguise.”

“Huh?”

Wow. Apparently he wasn’t even familiar with the concept. Then again, I guess he could have gotten into the city easily enough otherwise. “A disguise is just...a way to alter your appearance and hide your real identity.”

“I see... And how would we go about doing this?”

“Hmm, good question. Why don’t we just hide your face for now?” I squatted, put my hands to the ground, and began channeling my magical power into it.

“Halt!”

There were two soldiers guarding the gate we approached. One

was a stern-looking man with the head of a snake; the other a cocky-looking guy with the head of a pig.

“Who are you people?! What business d’you have here?!” shouted Snake-Face, one hand already on the sword at his hip.

Pig-Head, on the other hand, was busy silently leering at Eris. *Damn dirty animal... You better not do anything funny, or else!*

As we’d decided beforehand, I stepped forward to do the talking. “Hi there. We’re a group of travelers.”

“You adventurers or what?”

“Y—uh, no. Just ordinary travelers.” I’d very nearly answered “yes,” but we didn’t have anything to back up a claim like that. Then again, Eris and I were obviously pretty young, so we probably could have passed as wannabe adventurers trying to get started...

“Who’s that man you’ve got with you? Looks like a suspicious character.”

Ruijerd was currently wearing a crude stone helmet that I’d whipped up only a few minutes before. It completely hid his face. We’d also wrapped the head of his spear in cloth; at a glance, you might have taken it for some sort of staff. He definitely looked suspicious, but at least they couldn’t tell he was a Superd.

“That’s my older brother. He tried on some helmet an adventurer gave him, and then realized he couldn’t take it off. We thought there might be someone in the city who could help...”

“Hahaha! What a moron! Ah, all right then. Go talk to the old lady in the supplies shop, she’ll figure somethin’ out.” Chortling loudly, Snake-Face stepped back and took his hand off his hilt.

Well, that went better than expected.

Back in Japan, I’m pretty sure the cops would have taken a stranger in a full-face helmet back to the station for a few questions, but we’d gotten off awfully easy. Maybe it was because Ruijerd had a pair of kids with him...or maybe it just wasn’t that unusual to see people wandering around the city with headgear on.

“Incidentally, where would we go if we needed to earn some money?”

“Huh? Ya lookin’ for a job or something?”

“Well, we have to stay here until we can get this helmet off my brother. And if they charge a fee, we’d have to scrape together the cash to cover that.”

Snake-Face nodded, muttering, “Yeah, guess I wouldn’t put it past that old bag.” Apparently the supplies shop lady here drove a bit of a hard bargain. Good thing it wasn’t really our problem. “You’d probably want the Adventurers’ Guild, kid. Dunno where else a bunch of broke out-of-towners like yourselves could earn their keep.”

“Okay then. Is that...”

“The guild’s right down this street here. Big building. Ya won’t miss it.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Once you’re registered there, you’ll get a slightly better rate at the inns. Can’t hurt to get your names down in the book at least.”

With a polite little nod to the guard, I began moving toward the gate...only to pause at the last moment. “By the way...is there a reason the city’s being guarded so heavily at the moment?”

“Oh. Yeah. Someone said they saw that monster Dead End in the area, so we’re kinda on high alert right now.”

“Wait, seriously?! Talk about scary...”

“Yeah, no kiddin’. Let’s hope he just wanders off somewhere soon, huh?”

Dead End, huh? Judging from the name...if you run into him, I guess your life’s as good as over? Must be one terrifying monster.

The buildings weren’t quite as tall in Rikarisu as they were back in Roa, but it felt like there were just as many of them. The two cities seemed to have pretty similar layouts. Most of the facilities near the entrance were stables and inns that clearly catered to traveling merchants.

“Hmm. The Adventurers’ Guild, huh...?”

Based on everything I’d heard, the adventurers of this world were

essentially glorified temp workers. People with certain skills registered with the “agency,” meaning the guild; by completing the jobs it had on offer, you could build a reputation for yourself. Ordinary people brought a variety of jobs directly to the guild, and it handed them out to any adventurers who were up to the task.

“I’m not sure how much we’ll be able to earn there, but it might be a good idea to register. They’ll probably give us something we can use for identification at least. What do you think, Eris?”

“Ooh! Yes, of course! Let’s be adventurers!” The girl’s eyes were actually shining with excitement. No surprise there, really...she’d always loved listening to Ghislaine’s tales of the glory days.

“Are you already an adventurer or anything, Ruijerd?”

“No. I’ve never set foot in a city large enough to have a guild before.”

Ah, right. They probably didn’t bother setting up shop in every random little village.

“Okay. I think that’s more convenient for us, anyway...”

A plan of sorts was beginning to take shape inside my mind.

We couldn’t expect Ruijerd to wear that big, heavy lump of a helmet forever. And if we kept his face hidden, he’d never get a chance to improve the reputation of his people. We could always try to accomplish something great right off the bat, then start spreading rumors that a Superd warrior was responsible...but as rookie adventurers, we’d probably be running errands inside the city for the moment. Solving little problems for ordinary people might actually be the better approach. After all, it was the last thing anyone would expect from a “bloodthirsty killer.” If we kept at it diligently enough, we might build up some trust from the people in this city at least.

Ruijerd was basically a good-hearted guy. Stuff like finding lost children was right up his alley, and it might work better to change the public’s impression of his people than running off to slay some huge beast. I mean, saving a child worked wonders for him with the Migurd village, didn’t it? Based on that, we should probably focus on helping people rather than bloody monster hunts. We could just let his kindness speak for itself.

That said...if we wanted to get him a reputation for helping

people, the helmet was going to be an issue. I'd have a hard time trusting someone who hid his face personally. Maybe we could switch to something that only covered his hair and forehead? Nah, that probably wasn't good enough. Social etiquette might be a little different in this world, but keeping your headgear on constantly sounded pretty rude to me.

Still, scraping away anonymously at tiny jobs wasn't going to get us anywhere. We had to make the whole city aware of Ruijerd's presence, and we had to convince them it was a positive thing.

"But how the heck do we do that...?"

First and foremost, he needed to become *recognizable*. No matter how many good deeds he did, we'd never make progress if they were all attributed to some "unknown adventurer." Maybe it really would be best to start off by slaying a big monster or two? Just to get people to remember his name...

Strength counted for a great deal in this world. Bringing down a truly fearsome beast could potentially give our little group a slight boost in social standing. Of course, everyone already knew the Superd were incredibly powerful fighters, so there was also a chance it could backfire...

No, wait. What if the city was in imminent danger or something? Like, some giant monster's rampaging through the streets, everyone's cowering in terror, and the Sexy Demon Hero Ruijerd jumps in to the rescue! With dramatic music blaring in the background!

Ooh. That could totally work.

The main stumbling block was the fact that we needed a rampaging monster to make this happen, but I'd heard a name that sounded promising just a minute ago.

"Ruijerd, do you know what this Dead End thing is?" Assuming it's some sort of powerful monster, we could find some way to lure it toward the city, then take it out just as everyone started to panic. Everyone loves a nice, clean "good triumphs over evil" story, right?

Unfortunately, Ruijerd's response proceeded to derail my train of thought completely. "It's me."

"...Uhm, what?"

Huh? Is he getting all philosophical on me again?!

“Some people call me by that name, Rudeus.”

Ah. Okay, so he meant it literally. That’s one lovely nickname he’s got there...

It did make sense. Of course you’d freak out if you thought a legendary mass-murderer was wandering around outside your city. Honestly though...“Dead End” felt like a little much. Just how terrified were they of Ruijerd? Those guards out at the gate really needed to get their act together, in retrospect. They probably didn’t even think of the Superd as people. They’d been expecting a rampaging, vicious monster; it never even crossed their minds that Ruijerd might be clever enough to disguise himself.

“Hmm. Now what...?”

There was a potential upside here: that nickname of his seemed to be well-known. Maybe we could use that to our advantage somehow.

“Ruijerd. They don’t have a bounty on your head or anything, do they?”

“No. That won’t be an issue.”

Really now? You promise? I’m gonna take your word on that, okay?

All right then. Let’s readjust this plan a bit.

Before heading to the Adventurers’ Guild, we spent some time wandering through the roadside stalls clustered around the entrance to the city. Shops like these tended to be pretty similar anywhere you went, but the specific items they had on offer could vary quite a bit. For example...where Roa’s stables were full of horses for sale or rent, on the Demon Continent they seemed to favor some type of giant lizard creature. They were apparently better suited to the steep, craggy terrain that characterized this part of the world. Also, they didn’t have an organized passenger carriage system here. You had to buy a ride from one of a number of independently-operating merchants.

We had a very long journey ahead of us. There were all sorts of things I was dying to purchase. But I already knew what we were looking for on this particular trip. We’d just have to pick up the rest a

little bit at a time.

After a quick look to get a sense for the market prices of various items, I started hunting for an affordable stall that had the things we needed. We weren't in a huge hurry or anything, but I didn't want to waste hours and hours out here. All I wanted to buy was a hood and some dye... Oh, and ideally some sort of citrusy fruit.

"Hey, pops. Aren't you asking a bit much for this dye? Feels like a bit of a rip-off."

"Put a sock in it, kid. That's the goin' price right there."

"Really? You suuure?"

"Of course I'm sure, dammit!"

"They were selling something really similar over there for half the price, you know..."

"You serious?!"

"Well, I'm sure your stuff's just higher-quality, right? Hmm, this hood's kinda nice. Look, I'll buy the dye and a couple of those lemony things over there, so why don't you throw it in for free?"

"Hah! What a little haggler! Fine, you win. Take it!"

"Oh, and while we're here...any interest in buying a few things from us? These are genuine Pax Coyote pelts, and we've got a few Acid Wolf fangs too."

"Damn, look at 'em all! Gimme just a moment here... Two, four, eight... All righty. How's about three scrap iron coins for the bunch?"

"Come on, they're worth at least six."

"All right, all right. I'll give you four."

"Okay then. Pleasure doing business with you."

It took a bit of doing, but I'd managed to wrap the whole thing up in a single transaction. Since I didn't really know what prices for most things were like around here, I wasn't entirely sure how much money I'd just spent. To be honest, I had a sneaking suspicion the guy had ripped me off.

Oh well. In any case, this left us with one iron coin, four scrap iron coins, and ten stone coins. This money was a gift from Master Roxy's parents. I'd have to spend it thoughtfully.

With our shopping trip at an end, the three of us slipped into a quiet back alley. I was a little worried we might run into some stereotypical hoodlums...but then again, Ruijerd would take care of that for us, wouldn't he? Might even be a chance to earn ourselves a little pocket money...

"Hey, Ruijerd. If anyone tries to mug us, could you just beat them black and blue?"

"Until they're nearly dead, you mean?"

"Uh, no. Just knock them around a little bit, thanks."

Sadly, nobody actually showed up to hassle us. But now that I thought about it, guys desperate enough to rob people probably wouldn't have much cash on them in the first place.

"Okay, Ruijerd. Let's start off by dying your hair."

"Dying my hair...?"

"Right. That's what this stuff is for."

"I see... So you're going to change its color? That's a clever idea, to be sure." He seemed genuinely impressed. I guess people didn't really dye their hair in this world. Either that, or Ruijerd just wasn't aware of the concept. He clearly didn't spend much time in towns or cities. "However, wouldn't it have been better to choose a color that's less similar to my own?"

I'd gone with a blue dye—a reasonably close approximation of the color of Migurd hair. "Nah. The Migurd village is only three days walk away from here, so there are probably a ton of people here who know about them. I figured we'd make you into one of them, Ruijerd."

"...What about the two of you?"

"Oh, we're just your lackeys. You helped us out and took us in at some point."

"Lackeys...? I thought you were warriors, on equal standing with myself."

"Well, yes, we are. I'm just talking about our cover story. Don't worry, you don't really have to remember all this... I'll just be acting like your henchman when we're around other people basically."

Our next step was going to be putting on something of a show.

I took some time to explain the premise of our act to Ruijerd.

From this point on, he was going to be a young Migurd man named “Royce” who’d recently begun impersonating the infamous Superd warrior Dead End.

Royce had always yearned to inspire fear and awe in people. Not long ago, he’d happened across a pair of lost children in the wilderness—one who was capable of using magic, and another who proved to be talented with the sword. He’d saved their lives, and they’d idolized him ever since.

“You idolize me?”

“Uhm, I wouldn’t go quite that far personally.”

“I see.”

In any case, these two children were actually very powerful fighters for their age. Once he realized this, Royce hit on a clever idea: Why not assume the identity of the legendary warrior Ruijerd? It seemed like the easiest possible way to strike fear into the hearts of everyone he met. Royce had always been unusually tall for a Migurd after all. And his two young companions were very competent. If he just claimed their achievements as his own, he’d be famous in no time.

“This man’s a lowlife. He had no right to use my name.”

“Yeah, it’s all very despicable. But let’s say this phony Ruijerd starts to go around doing good deeds. What would people think?”

“...I don’t know. What?”

“That he’s obviously a fake, but also a good guy at heart.”

We needed our act to be nicely comical and kind of incoherent. The key here was to get everyone thinking of the Ruijerd-imposter as a total fraud who also happened to be a weirdly decent person.

“Hmm...”

“Basically, if word starts going around that this fake Ruijerd is a nice guy, we’re on the right track. The rumor will get vaguer and vaguer over time, and eventually people will just start saying that ‘Ruijerd’ is a good guy.”

“...That sounds wonderful, but will it really work that way?”

“Oh, absolutely,” I answered in a tone of easy confidence. At the very least, this couldn’t really hurt. Everyone already thought Ruijerd was a vicious monster; his reputation wasn’t getting any worse.

“I see. I had no idea such a simple plan could work...”

“This won’t be simple, believe me. And there’s always a chance something will go very wrong.” As a general rule, any long-term plan goes awry at some point. The more detailed and complex it is, the further off-track you’ll eventually end up. Still, so long as we managed to get tons of rumors flying around about Ruijerd, there was a good chance his reputation would begin to reflect his good-hearted nature.

“True. What do you propose we do if my deception is exposed?”

“What do you mean? You don’t need to tell any lies, Ruijerd.”

“...I don’t understand.”

Ruijerd was playing the role of “a Migurd who called himself a Superd.” For the most part, he’d be doing good deeds and earning the public’s affection, just like he wanted. He wasn’t even going to lie about his name.

The whole “Royce” thing was mostly just a fallback explanation I’d use if someone started suspecting Ruijerd really *was* who he claimed to be. The man himself would keep using his actual name. Ruijerd would openly admit he was a Superd named Ruijerd. Everyone else would just decide all on their own that he was actually a Migurd named Royce with delusions of grandeur.

In other words, he didn’t have to say anything that wasn’t true. I’d be handling all the lying for him behind the scenes. I felt like he’d probably object to having me deceive people on his behalf, though, so I’d decided to keep quiet about that last part.

“Everyone’s just going to *assume* you’re actually a Migurd, you see?”

“Ah... Right. I’m the one pretending to be myself... But wait, I have to act like I’m Royce, as well...? This is giving me something of a headache, Rudeus. What exactly do I need to do?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just be yourself.”

Ruijerd looked more than a little reluctant. Whatever his other talents, the man probably wasn’t cut out to be an actor.

“That said, make sure you don’t snap and kill anyone just for taunting you, okay?”

“Hmm... Do you mean that I shouldn’t get into any fights?”

“You can scrap if you need to, but pretend that you’re having a tough time. Take a few punches, start breathing heavily, that sort of thing. In the end, try to make it look like you just barely scraped out a win.”

As the words left my mouth, it occurred to me that Ruijerd might not even be capable of putting on that kind of show, but—

“You want me to go easy on them? What’s the point of that?”

Apparently it wouldn’t be an issue.

“We want people to think you’re too weak to be the real Ruijerd. And we want your opponent to think, ‘Hey, what if he’s the real deal, though? Wouldn’t that make me pretty awesome?’”

“I don’t think I understand...”

“It’s a way to convince people you’re a fake, while also making them feel good about themselves.”

“But what does making them feel good accomplish?”

“It’ll encourage them to spread rumors that the Superd are actually pushovers.”

Ruijerd scowled. “The Superd are *not* pushovers.”

“Believe me, I know. But your strength is part of what makes people so afraid of you. If they think you’re weak, it might help us resolve conflicts peacefully, like we just did at the gate.”

That said, we didn’t want everyone thinking his people were totally powerless, either. That might end up encouraging more harassment of the surviving Superd villages...assuming there were still some out there somewhere. This was going to be a delicate balancing act.

“Hm. Well, if you say so, Rudeus...”

Okay then. I think that just about covers it for now.

I didn’t feel the need to issue too many specific instructions at the moment. It would only increase our odds of screwing something up. “Anyway...I’ll give you all the support I can, Ruijerd. But the outcome’s ultimately going to depend on you, okay?”

“Of course. My thanks, Rudeus.”

With the initial explanations at an end, I proceeded to bleach

Ruijerd's hair using juice from the lemon-like fruits we'd bought a few minutes earlier.

The results weren't perfect, but his natural emerald green hair color did fade away for the most part. I went ahead and slathered on the blue dye.

Hmm. Not the prettiest job I've ever seen.

Still, at least it didn't look particularly green anymore. Maybe he *sort of* looked like a Migurd? At a distance? If you totally ignored how tall he was?

Well, he didn't really look like a Superd, and that was the most important thing. An ambiguous disguise was probably what we wanted anyway. The ideal reaction would be something like... "This guy kinda looks like a Migurd, but not really. And he's calling himself a Superd, but that doesn't look right either... So what the hell?"

"Also, I think you should be wearing this," I said, taking off my pendant and placing it on Ruijerd.

"This is...a Migurd amulet, isn't it?"

"Yes. My master gave it to me as a graduation present, and I've been wearing it ever since." With this dangling around Ruijerd's neck, everyone would at least assume he was somehow connected to the Migurd.

"It must be precious to you then. I'll make sure to return it to you safely."

"Yeah. You better."

"Of course."

"Fair warning, I might have to murder you if you lose it."

"Understood, Rudeus."

"Specifically, I'd block all of the city's exits using earth magic, then fill this entire crater to the brim with magma."

"What? You'd kill all the people living here as well? There are children in this city, you know."

"Right. So if you want to keep them safe and sound, you'd better take good care of that amulet."

"Hrm... If you're really that worried about this, perhaps you

shouldn't let me borrow it in the first place..."

"Come on, Ruijerd. I'm only kidding around, obviously!"

"..."

Now then...the next step was to get Eris in the hood I'd bought earlier. That red hair of hers was very eye-catching, and we wanted everyone's attention to stay focused on our leading man.

"So Eris, I was thinking..."

At this point, I unfolded the thing for the first time, and realized it had little kitty ear-bags...sort of like the cowls white mages wore in Final Fantasy III.

Was this intended for a beast-person or something? Damn. I may have messed this up. Eris wasn't especially picky about her clothing, but from what I remembered of the traditional Boreas family greeting, she absolutely hated cosplaying as a cat girl.

"Uh...well, about this hood..."

"Huh? Oh! Uhm, what about it?"

"I was thinking...maybe you could wear it..."

"Really?!"

For some reason, the girl actually seemed overjoyed. Maybe she didn't hate that pose itself as much as I thought she did...? She immediately pulled on the hood, smiling happily. "I'll take good care of it!"

Well, okay then. I didn't really understand why, but that worked out! Excellent!

Now then...it seemed we were ready to head over to the Adventurers' Guild. This needed to be *comical*. Just had to keep that in mind.

God I hope this goes smoothly...

Chapter 7: The Adventurers' Guild

The Adventurers' Guild was a gathering place for some of the toughest customers in the city. Some were physically powerful; others were skilled, veteran magicians. Some favored the sword. Others used axes, staves, or even their bare hands in battle. Some loudly boasted of their prowess, while others silently sneered at the braggarts. There were warriors clad in heavy armor, but also lightly dressed sorcerers. There were pig-like men and snake-women; men with insectoid wings and women with the legs of horses. All sorts of people from all sorts of races formed a single, teeming crowd.

That was how things usually were in the guilds of the Demon Continent. The Rikarisu branch was certainly no exception.

Suddenly, someone flung its huge swinging doors open with a bang.

Many of those inside turned their eyes toward the entrance, curious. It wasn't unusual for people to throw those doors open dramatically, but the reasons why they did so varied. Had some party just returned victorious? Perhaps a group of monsters were launching an attack and the guards at the gate had called for aid? Or was it just the wind playing tricks on everyone? Of course, there'd also been some talk that Dead End was wandering around this area recently, but surely —

Before anyone could follow this line of thought to its conclusion, three people strode through the open door.

The first in line was a boy with an oddly confident smirk on his face. He wore grimy but expensive-looking clothes and carried a staff wrapped in cloth. Despite his obvious youth, the battle-scarred crowd of grown-ups inside the guild didn't appear to intimidate him in the slightest. *Who the heck is this kid?* many wondered. He seemed completely out of place here. Might he belong to some race of demons who looked younger than they really were?

Following closely on this strange boy's heels, as if to hide in his

shadow, was another youngster. This one seemed to be a girl. Her face was mostly hidden by a hood, but her eyes glittered watchfully from within it. There was something about her bearing that suggested she knew how to use that sword at her hip. A few veterans inside the guild instantly pegged her for a skilled fighter.

The last of the group to enter was a tall, imposing man with a red jewel on his forehead and a scar running diagonally across his face. These were the same distinguishing features as the infamous monster known as Dead End; some adventurers nearly cried out in alarm, only to notice at the last moment that this man's hair was blue rather than green. It had to be someone else who bore a strong resemblance to the murderous Superd.

Altogether, these three made a strange bunch. Strange...and unsettling. There wasn't a single ordinary adventurer among the three of them. No one could begin to guess what they were even doing here.

The trio came to a sudden halt, and the boy shouted at the watchful crowd: "Hey, c'mon! What's with the slack-jawed stares, folks?! Don't you know who this man right here is?!"

Uh, no. Why the hell would we? thought everyone simultaneously.

"This is the infamous Superd monster, Dead End Ruijerd himself! Don't just stand there, idiots! Make with the screaming and running for your lives!"

Come on, do you really think we're gonna buy that? thought everyone in unison. Everyone knew the Superds' hair was vivid green, not some dirty shade of blue.

"Can you *believe* these country bumpkins, Boss? They don't even know the face of terror when they see it! What a joke. All those rumors flying around, but we walked right in and no one even recognized you!"

Okay, so apparently this kid is hellbent on claiming that his pal here is a vicious, bloodthirsty devil. The more they thought about it, the more hilarious his high-pitched little tirade seemed. The unsettling aura this little band had previously projected faded away almost instantly.

The kid's "Boss" had the red eye on his forehead, sure. And the scar across his face. They both looked pretty convincing even. But he'd gotten some really basic details completely wrong.

"*Snort...*" At this point, some anonymous adventurer let out the

first quiet laugh of the afternoon.

“Hey, what’s your problem?!” shouted the boy fiercely, spinning in the direction of the sound. “Did I say something funny, punk?!”

It was just too ridiculous. Stifled chuckles began spreading throughout the crowd. After a long moment, someone finally offered a reply.

“*Snort...* Hehe. J-just a tip, kid...the Superd have *green* hair...”

With that, an explosion of hilarity filled the guild’s lobby from one end to the other.

Judging from the gales of laughter buffeting us from all sides, our act had gotten off to a decent start.

At a glance, the Adventurers’ Guild seemed to be even more of a rough-and-tumble place than I’d expected. The crowd was incredibly diverse, although that was probably typical for any gathering place this deep inside the Demon Continent. I’d noticed a man with a horse’s head, a guy with the scythe-like arms of a praying mantis, a woman with butterfly wings, and a girl who was all snake from the waist down. They were mostly human in appearance, but there was always at least one strikingly unusual feature to be found. Even the people without animal body parts weren’t exactly regular human beings. I saw people with spiky thorns growing out of their shoulders, and others with totally blue skin; there were even a few with four arms or two heads. Based on what I was seeing, the Migurd and Superd were probably some of the more humanoid demons, in terms of appearance.

“S-stupid jerks! Don’t you dare laugh at our boss! He took down a whole bunch of monsters that were attacking us out in the wastelands... all by himself!”

Rather than flinching under the crowd’s scrutiny, I strode further into the lobby, trying to act convincingly furious.

“You hearin’ this, guys? D-Dead End’s goin’ around rescuin’ lost kids apparently!”

“Ahahah! Damn, I never knew the guy was so soft-hearted!”

“Seriously though? Maybe he’ll come save my bacon sometime too! Gahaha!”

Normally, I would’ve frozen up in the face of all this mockery, but this time it wasn’t really getting to me. Was it because I was only playing a part? Because the crowd around me was so...surreal? Or maybe...I’d actually become a more confident human being?

Nah, let’s not get carried away here.

They were mostly laughing at Ruijerd, not me. There was no reason to pat myself on the back until I could shrug off cruelty that was actually aimed at me.

A quick survey of the room told me that no one in it suspected Ruijerd really was the genuine article. That meant it was time for me to trot out scene A, one of the bits of dialogue we’d worked out beforehand.

“I’ve had enough of these morons! C’mon, Boss, teach ’em a lesson!”

“Hmph... Let the fools laugh if they want to.”

Incidentally, we’d also practiced a scene B, in case there wasn’t any laughter beforehand.

“Let the fools laugh... Oh man, what a badass!”

“H-holy crap, he’s already actin’ like a big shot!”

“Gahaha! Poor guy! I almost w-wanna apologize...”

You’d probably be apologizing right now if you knew the truth, man. With tears running down your face.

“Hmph! You idiots are lucky our boss is such a big-hearted guy!” I announced, then promptly turned to examine the room. To our left, there was an enormous bulletin board covered in pieces of paper. To our right, there were four wooden counters, staffed by a handful of clerks who were staring at us in astonishment. That looked like our initial destination.

I strode confidently over to the right side of the lobby with my companions in tow...only to realize that they used some pretty damn high counters.

I nodded up at Ruijerd, and he promptly hoisted me up.

“Hey, you there! We want to register as adventurers!”

I'd deliberately spoken loudly enough that the whole crowd could hear. There was another immediate explosion of laughter.

"Dead End's a friggin' newbie, huh?!"

"*Hack, wheeze...* Agh, my achin' sides!"

"Oh man! Am I g-gonna have to show Dead End the ropes?!"

"Now that's somethin' to write home about!"

Okay, I think that's enough for now. "Will you people pipe down?! I can't hear the clerk!"

After I shouted at them, the crowd did start to quiet down, although the smirks on their faces showed no signs of fading.

"Sure, kid. N-no problem..."

"G-gotta pay attention to the rules and everything, right...?
Snort..."

"Hehehe..."

I could still hear some quiet chuckling behind my back, but that wasn't really a problem.

So far, so good.

And so, after roughly forty-four years of obstinate struggle, I finally realized my long-cherished dream of setting foot inside an employment office...sort of.

I had my "credentials" as a Water-Saint-tier magician up my sleeve, a trusty new companion who hadn't worked in *centuries* at my side, and a somewhat spoiled little lady behind me who I needed to provide for. At the end of the day, a man's gotta work if he wants to eat...

But anyway. Let's get started.

"I'm sorry for the commotion, miss. Mind helping us out?"

The clerk across the counter from me had orange hair and a striking pair of fangs protruding from her mouth. Her top was also rather low-cut, and she happened to have three breasts, which meant

two times the cleavage. What an efficient innovation.

“Huh? Oh, of course. You want to...register as adventurers, correct?”

The clerk seemed a bit taken aback by my tone suddenly becoming much politer. Still, it probably wasn't wise to try and keep up the belligerent act forever; it'd be much too easy to slip up and give myself away at some point. She'd probably assume I'd just been trying to show the crowd I wasn't a pushover. “That's right. We're totally new to this actually.”

“In that case, would you please start off by filling out these forms?”

The clerk reaching under the counter and retrieved three sheets of paper plus three slender sticks of charcoal, which she handed to me. The forms all looked identical. There was a line for your name, a line for your profession, and some text describing the guild and summarizing its rules.

“I can read that out loud for you, if you can't read it yourself,” offered the clerk, just as I was starting to wonder how some illiterate warrior from a backwoods village would deal with all this.

“Thank you, but we're fine.”

I picked up one of the papers and read it out loud in the Human tongue for Eris's benefit.

1 — Use of the Adventurers' Guild

Registering with the Adventurers' Guild (“the guild”) entitles you to the use of its services.

2 — Guild Services

Registered adventurers may visit any of our branches—found all around the world—to take on jobs, receive payment for completed work, sell raw materials, and exchange currencies.

3 — Your Registration Record

All information related to your registration with the guild will

be recorded exclusively on your Adventurer Card, for which you are personally responsible.

Should your card be lost or destroyed, a new one can be issued. However, your rank will be reset to F, and a region-specific fee will be imposed.

4 — *Leaving the Guild*

Registered adventurers may withdraw from the guild at any branch.

Re-registration at a later date is permitted, but your rank will be reset to F.

5 — *Prohibited Conduct*

Adventurers are strictly prohibited from:

- Violating local laws
- Taking any action severely prejudicial to the reputation of the guild
- Obstructing another adventurer from carrying out their tasks
- Buying or selling guild jobs

Any violation of this policy will result in the assessment of a fine and the revocation of your status as an adventurer.

6 — *Breach of Contract*

Any adventurer who fails to complete a job they undertake is required to pay one fifth of the listed reward as a breach-of-contract penalty.

This fee must be paid in full within half a year. Failure to pay by this deadline will result in the revocation of your status as an adventurer.

7 — *Rank*

Adventurers are ranked in seven tiers based on their experience and abilities, beginning with Rank F and advancing to Rank S. As a general rule, adventurers can only undertake jobs rated within one rank of their current rank.

8 — *Promotion / Demotion*

By completing a preset number of jobs (based on their current rank), adventurers can secure promotion to a higher rank.

If an adventurer does not feel ready to take on a higher rank, they may decline promotion.

In addition, failing to complete a certain number of jobs consecutively may result in demotion to a lower rank.

9 — *Duties and Responsibilities*

Should the local authorities call for aid in the event of a monster attack or similar crisis, all adventurers are obliged to offer their assistance.

In addition, adventurers are expected to obey any orders issued by their local guild in the event of an emergency.

By the time I was halfway through the list, Eris was looking increasingly fed-up. This sort of stilted, formal writing wasn't exactly her forte. I didn't enjoy it much either, but this stuff seemed like it could be important. I hadn't noticed any particular problems yet, but...

"Uh, miss? I have a question..."

"What would that be?"

"Is it all right if we fill out this form in another language?"

"Another language? Such as...?"

"The Human tongue, maybe?"

"Ah. In that case, it won't be a problem."

Based on her first clause, it may have been a problem if we wanted to use a more uncommon language. Japanese was definitely out, of course. I decided to go with the Demon-God tongue; it seemed like a good idea to give them the impression that I might be some sort of youthful-looking demon, rather than a human child.

"Go on, Eris. You should fill yours out too." I could have done it for her, probably, but it was usually best to personally sign documents like this.

In any case, all the conversations inside the guild so far had been in Demon. That was probably the only reason Eris had pouted silently instead of getting into it with the crowd; if she'd actually understood

what they were saying, she might have drawn her sword and gone charging after someone.

“Not that we’re planning to do so, but...what would happen if we used a false name on these?”

“We don’t have any particular rules about that. Use whatever name you want to register.”

“Don’t you get criminals signing up under made-up aliases or anything?”

“Well, the definition of a ‘criminal’ isn’t the same on the Demon Continent as it is in other places. So long as someone isn’t causing trouble for the guild, it isn’t much of a problem. However, if you’re ever stripped of your status as an adventurer, you’ll find it impossible to register again...on this continent at least.”

“That seems very...lenient.”

“It does cause us issues of course. But many people on this continent weren’t named at birth, and a stricter policy would prevent them from registering at all.”

Interesting. It sounded like the guild on this continent had a certain level of independence from the broader organization, if it could set its own policies like that. I’d come up with the whole “Royce” thing in case they wouldn’t let a Superd register, but it seemed that wasn’t going to be a problem.

“If I register here then head to another continent, will I need to re-register with the guild over there?”

“That won’t be necessary.”

Figured as much, but good to know.

“If you’re finished with that form, please place your hand on this.”

This time, the clerk took out a transparent board about the size and shape of an erotic game box, with a magic circle engraved at its center. I could see a small metal card sitting underneath its surface.

Hmm. What’s all this then?

“Like this?”

As I pressed my hand flat against the center of the plate, the clerk tapped the button on its far edge.

“Name, Rudeus Greyrat. Profession, Magician. Rank F.”

After reading out the contents of my form in a flat, steady voice, she pressed the button a second time, and the magic circle glowed faintly red for just a moment.

“Here you are. This is your Adventurer Card.”

The ordinary-looking metal card was now marked with faintly glowing letters:

NAME: Rudeus Greyrat

SEX: Male

RACE: Human

AGE: 10

PROFESSION: Magician

RANK: F

For some reason, it was all written in the Human tongue.

Ah, I see. So that thing's basically some sort of magic printing press, huh? Hmm. Wouldn't it be really convenient to use it for books too? If they've got 'em in public facilities like this, I wonder why they're not all over the place...

Then again, maybe the upper plate and the card itself were special items too. It sounded like the clerk had manually input my name, rank, and occupation, but the device seemed to have sensed my race, age, and sex from my hand somehow. That was kind of a bummer actually. So much for hiding the fact that I was a human. Well, whatever. I'd just have to roll with it.

NAME: Ruijerd Superdia

SEX: Male

RACE: Demon

AGE: 566

PROFESSION: Warrior

RANK: F

For a second there, I was seriously worried this thing might reveal that Ruijerd really was a Superd, but his card went with the nicely vague word “Demon” instead. Definitely a relief. The device *had* exposed his actual age, but the clerk seemed to take that in stride. Maybe absurdly long lifespans weren’t that rare among demonkind.

The name “Ruijerd Superdia” also didn’t get much of a reaction. She probably just assumed it was a pseudonym. Talk about rude... I’d just told her we weren’t planning on using those. Then again, maybe it wasn’t common knowledge that Dead End’s real name was “Ruijerd.” I’d heard the words Dead End thrown around a ton in here, but not his actual name.

Incidentally, his card had come out in the Demon-God tongue...

NAME: Eris Boreas Greyrat

SEX: Female

RACE: Human

AGE: 12

PROFESSION: Swordswoman

RANK: F

But Eris’s was written in the Human tongue as well.

“Is there a reason why his card is in a different language than ours, miss?”

“Yes. It changes depending on your race.”

Ah. So humans just got Human tongue by default, no matter what.

“What happens if you’re mixed-race?”

“Sometimes it might use a bit of both the relevant languages, but typically it would pin you as the race more of your ancestors are from.”

“Hmm. But what if you’re a Human who can only speak Demon-God or something?”

“In that case, you can just press your finger against the center of the card and speak the name of the language you’d prefer.”

Just to try it out, I pressed my finger to my card and said, “Beast-God tongue.”

The words on my card changed instantly.

This is kinda fun. “Demon-God tongue. Fighting-God tongue—”

“Try not to do that too often,” the clerk interjected. “You’ll use up the card’s magical energy more quickly.”

“What happens if it runs out?”

“You’ll need to have it recharged at a guild branch.”

Right. So the card itself was definitely a magical implement as well. There was probably some tiny crystal embedded inside it or something.

“Would the information recorded on it disappear?”

“No, fortunately.”

“If you keep using the same card for a long time, does the battery start draining faster or anything?”

“The battery...? If you’re referring to its magical energy, then no. The supply is usually good for about a year, but we’ll replenish it every time you stop by to report a completed task, so it typically won’t run dry at all.”

“How much does that service cost?”

“Well, there’s no fee of any sort...”

Okay, so why did you tell me off for playing around with it? Hmm. Maybe people had been known to storm in and yell at the clerks when their cards ran out of juice? Customer service jobs always sucked, no matter what world you landed in.

“Okay, got it. I’ll be more careful from now on.”

I had no idea who invented these things, but it was an interesting little system. I felt like there were probably all sorts of other applications for “rechargeable” magic tools... But maybe the guild was monopolizing the technology?

Ah well. No point thinking about it right now.

“Hehe...” Eris, meanwhile, had been gazing at her little card with a big smile on her face for some time now.

I know you’re happy, but don’t lose that thing, okay?

“Would you like to register a party as well?” asked the clerk.

“A party? Oh! Yes. Please.” Somehow, that part had slipped my mind completely, probably because there wasn’t anything about it on the initial paperwork. We’d been intending to set ourselves up as a party from the very start. But—

“Before that, would you mind giving us a rundown of the party system?”

With a polite nod, the clerk began explaining the nitty-gritty details:

- A party can have a maximum of seven members.
- Only adventurers within one rank of the party’s leader can join the party.
- Your party rank is the average of all your members’ ranks.
- For rank promotion purposes, all party members receive credit for any jobs completed as a party.
- Individual party members can still take on jobs independent of the party.
- To join a party, you need approval from both the party leader and the guild.
- To leave a party, you only need approval from the guild.
- The party leader has the right to eject any member from their party.
- Should the party leader die, their party is automatically disbanded.
- Two or more parties can join together to form a clan.
- High-performing clans are eligible to receive a variety of special rewards from the guild.

The clan parts didn’t seem especially relevant right now. We were going to be a small-scale operation for the foreseeable future.

“Now then, what would you like to use for your party’s name?”

“We’ll go with *Dead End*.”

The clerk’s face twitched a little, but she managed to paste a smile back on in no time. The woman was clearly a pro. “Very well. Let me have your cards for a moment, please.”

We retrieved the cards we'd just tucked away and passed them across the counter to the clerk. She stepped into the back for a moment, then returned. "Here you are. Please make sure everything's in order."

I looked down at my card and saw a new line had been added to the bottom:

PARTY: Dead End (F)

The "F" was presumably our party rank.

For some reason, it was a little embarrassing to see the words "Dead End" actually written out like that. It sounded intimidating when you said it aloud, but it was definitely a different story in print.

"At this point, we've fully completed the registration process. Congratulations."

"Thanks for your time, miss."

"If you want to take on any jobs, simply tear the relevant paper from the board and bring it over to our reception counters."

"Got it."

"Also, we handle purchasing behind the building, so make sure to head back there when you have something to sell."

"Out back. Got it. Thank you."

Phew. Finally done with the paperwork at least...

With our registration completed, the three of us headed over to take a look at the bulletin board. Unfortunately, that meant making our way through a gauntlet of smirking adventurers. Almost everyone looked at us like we were a bunch of monkeys in a zoo. But there were a few in the crowd who seemed more hostile than amused. Those were the ones I'd need to watch out for.

I'd told Ruijerd it was okay to scrap if he needed to, but I wasn't expecting much from him as an actor. There was no guarantee we'd be able to turn trouble to our advantage the way I wanted to. All said and

done, I didn't want to get into any fights today.

"Uh..."

All of a sudden, a leg stretched across the aisle we were walking down. The leg in question belonged to a frog...or frog-man. He had a blue body with black spots and the smuggest face I'd ever seen. His bulging cheeks inflated and deflated rapidly; it was obvious he was suppressing the urge to laugh.

Was the guy inviting us to trip over his leg or what? It brought back some unpleasant memories, but I pushed them out of my mind and stepped carefully over the obstacle.

"Gyahahaha!"

"Eeheeheehee!"

"Ghuh, ghuh, ghuh!"

For some reason, this prompted a burst of laughter from all around me. I flinched slightly at the noise, which only made them chortle harder. *Stay calm. It's no big deal. They were going to laugh at you no matter what you did.* I'd experienced the exact same thing in my previous life. This was classic, cookie-cutter bullying.

Following my lead, Eris tried stepping over the frog-man's leg as well; but he suddenly jerked it upward, catching her by the tip of her toes.

"Gah!"

Eris started pitching forward, but managed to catch herself at the last moment by slamming her leading foot down hard against the floor. Of course, this prompted more raucous laughter from everyone in the vicinity.

Her face bright red, Eris stared furiously back at the frog, her hands squeezed into fists and her teeth grinding loudly.

"Ooh. Sorry 'bout that, kiddo! My legs are so long an' thin I can barely keep 'em under control sometimes!"

The man did offer an apology of sorts. Not that she understood a word of it. *Crap. Is this going to turn into a fight? If she throws the first punch, things might get ugly fast...*

But to my surprise, Eris just snorted haughtily, turned on her heel, and strode over to join me. Her face was terrible to behold, but she'd

managed to control herself. *Good girl, Eris! Way to be the grown-up in the room! I'm giving you a fighting spirit prize! You just received 100 bonus points!*

Unfortunately, it was now Ruijerd's turn to face the frog-leg menace. Stretching his leg out like that really drove home just how long and skinny it was. Should he really be out adventuring with sticks like that for legs? Maybe they let him jump really high or something...?

Uh, focus, please. What's Ruijerd gonna do here?

Lifting his foot high, Ruijerd began stepping over the obstacle in his path. Just like with Eris, the frog-man jerked the leg up to trip him...

"Wh-wha?!"

Instead of Ruijerd, it was our slimy friend who took a tumble. Ruijerd had slipped a foot under the frog's leg as he raised it, then kicked upward to throw him totally off-balance. Flipped backward out of his chair, the man landed flat on his stomach in a classic squashed-frog pose.

Once again, everyone around us burst into laughter.

"Ghuh, ghuhuhuh!"

"W-way to get knocked down by a newbie, man!"

"Th-that's what you get for messing with a Superd! Hilarious!"

Froggy's bright blue face immediately shifted colors to a vivid shade of red. Very interesting. Was he actually cold-blooded?

"Bastard!" Hopping to his feet in a very froggy fashion, our new friend pulled a knife from his hip and pointed it threateningly at Ruijerd.

Huh? Seriously? You really want to go all life-or-death over this?

"Ya got a lotta nerve messin' with me like that, buddy!"

"...You should back down now, if you know what's good for you."

Ruijerd. Please. That's the sort of thing you say when you want to fight. The guy's got a knife, right? That's kind of... Hmm. Maybe this would still qualify as a scrap? Just barely...?

"Hey. C'mon, Perutko. Give it a rest." A horse-headed man suddenly stepped in from the sidelines to intercede. "Pickin' on newbies

went outta style years ago, man.”

“But this guy—”

“Ya just lost yer balance and fell, right?”

“Come on, Nokopara, the bastard’s scowlin’ at—”

“Ya *lost yer balance and fell*. Right?”

When Horseface repeated himself, Froggy paused, clicked his tongue bitterly, then stomped straight out of the guild. The crowd of onlookers promptly lost interest and began dispersing in groups of two and three.



Man. I'd given some thought to the possibility that we'd get into a fight here, but that was more nerve-wracking than expected.

With the crisis past, I turned around and made for the guild's bulletin board...totally oblivious to the ominous gaze of a certain horse-headed man.

The board was absolutely covered with dozens of pieces of paper. There was a mountain of work that needed doing apparently.

As a brand-new party, however, we could only take jobs ranked F or E, and there weren't any particularly epic-looking quests in those categories. The majority were just odd jobs around the city—stuff like organizing a warehouse, helping out in someone's kitchen, basic bookkeeping, looking for a lost pet, and exterminating insects.

None of them looked especially challenging, but the rewards were also low.

The actual forms looked like this, for example:

F

TASK: Warehouse Organizing REWARD: 5 stone coins

DETAILS: Manual labor, heavy lifting

LOCATION: Rikarisu Block 12, the warehouse with the red door

DURATION: Half a day to a day

DEADLINE: N/A

CLIENT: Dogamu of the Orte

NOTES: I've got a ton of stuff to move around, and not nearly enough manpower. Someone help me out. Ideally, someone strong.

F

TASK: Kitchen Help REWARD: 6 stone coins

DETAILS: Dishwashing, carrying food, etc.

LOCATION: Rikarisu Block 4, the Footfall Restaurant

DURATION: One day

DEADLINE: Before the next full moon

CLIENT: Shinitora of the Kanande

NOTES: We've been getting a ton of reservations lately. I need some extra hands in the kitchen. If you're up for a little taste-testing too, I'd appreciate it.

E

TASK: Lost Pet REWARD: One scrap iron coin

DETAILS: Find and catch a missing pet

LOCATION: Rikarisu Block 2, Kirib House, room three

DURATION: Until the pet's located

DEADLINE: None in particular

CLIENT: Meicel of the Houga

NOTES: My pet vanished and won't come home. I'm using up all my allowance money on this request. Someone please help.

They didn't seem like the sort of jobs you'd undertake as a party really. It looked like low-rank jobs tended to be "solo quests" for the most part. Any jobs we completed would count for all of us for rank

promotion purposes... At lower ranks, maybe people tended to take on a whole bunch of jobs as a party, then divide the work up among the members.

"Well, I guess we'd want to start with something nice and simple..." *Still, why's the lost pet one E-rank? Oh, right. I guess the city's pretty big...* The whole "until you find it" thing could also be a little awkward. There was a possibility the thing was dead after all. But that bit about the "allowance" had to mean that the client was a sweet, adorable little girl, right? It'd be pretty sad if no one helped her out...

"Aren't there any about fighting dragons or something?"

"There is one, but it's S rank. Over here."

"Ooh, really?! Wait...I can't read this."

"It says a stray dragon's taken up residence to the north of the city."

"Think we could take it down?"

"It would be best not to try. Dragons are fearsome foes."

"Right, right. Still, I kind of want to try slaying *something*..."

"The monster-hunting quests start at Rank C, I'm afraid."

"There aren't *any* ranked lower than that?"

"So it would appear."

"But I heard you're supposed start off by fighting goblins and stuff..."

"You won't find any monsters that weak on this continent."

As I looked through the low-level jobs, Eris was having a somewhat alarming conversation with Ruijerd, who handled all the reading for her. That guy really was a patient soul, wasn't he?

"Whoa there, my D-Dead End friends! Those are a little, uh... hehe...*high-rank* for you guys, ain't they?"

One of the guys who'd been laughing at us earlier sauntered over to the two of them with a big smirk on his face. It was a muscular man with the head of a horse...the same guy who'd stepped in to break up that fight a minute ago actually.

I moved fast and managed to get myself between him and Eris before he got too close. "Mind your own business! We'll take an F- or E-

rank job, just like we're supposed to!"

"Hey, calm down, buddy! I just wanted to give ya a little advice, okay?"

"No kidding. Like what?"

"Here, ya see this job? The lost pet one?" Reaching past me, Horseface ripped down the paper I'd been looking at only a few moments earlier.

"Yeah, I saw that one. Seemed like it might be kind of tough, since this city's so big."

"Huuuh? Hey, come on, kid! Ain't your boss the one an' only Dead End? Like, a Superd?"

"So what if he is?!"

"Is that eye on his forehead just a decoration or what? It doesn't matter how big the city is! He'll track that thing down in a single day, no sweat!"

Oh. Come to think of it, he's got a point. Ruijerd could locate living things with pinpoint accuracy. Even if we were looking for a lost cat or something, he'd probably manage just fine... Of course, Horseface here was clearly convinced that Ruijerd was a phony, meaning that his thoughtful "advice" was really just intended to provoke us. I needed to react accordingly.

"Shut up! Leave us alone!"

Still, I'd have to keep that missing pet job in mind. It seemed like a good chance to take advantage of Ruijerd's abilities.

"Let's go, Boss!"

"Hm? Aren't we going to take on any jobs?"

"Forget it! We'll come back when there aren't a bunch of jerks waiting around to sabotage us." The goal of this visit was to make our big appearance and get ourselves registered; I'd only looked at the board to get a sense of the type of jobs that were available. We'd get started in earnest tomorrow morning. "Come on. We're done here."

As the three of us left the guild behind, I heard another huge burst of laughter from inside.

"They're going home without even takin' a single job?!"

“Dead End ain’t in no rush, man! What a cool customer!”

“Gyahahahaha!”

I could see the bewilderment on Ruijerd’s face. It was hard to blame him for wondering if we were really on the right track here. As far as I was concerned, though, the afternoon had been a success. The people in that building were laughing at the words “Dead End” instead of flinching or grimacing. That wasn’t what we were shooting for in the long-term, but it was definitely a step in the right direction.

At the very least, I was convinced of that.

One way or another, the three of us were now full-fledged adventurers.

Chapter 8: The Adventurers' Inn

By the time we left the guild, it was getting dark outside. The sky was still bright, but the streets of Rikarisu seemed oddly gloomy. After a second, I realized it was a side effect of its location; the tall walls of the crater had cast the city into shadow well before the sun actually set. It'd probably be pitch black in no time.

"I guess we should find an inn right away."

Eris looked over me with a puzzled expression. "Can't we just camp outside the city or something?"

"Oh, come on. Might as well get a good night's sleep in a real bed when we're staying in a town, right?"

"You think?"

Ruijerd didn't seem to have an opinion one way or another. When we were camping out in the field, he'd often handled the night watch duties all by himself, since he could sense approaching enemies even when he was half-asleep. I'd woken a couple times in the middle of the night to the sound of something exploding, only to realize that Ruijerd had just sliced apart some hapless monster. It wasn't exactly conducive to a relaxing rest.

Anyway, an inn was definitely in order. For one thing, I was starving. We could probably buy something in the city, but we still had a ton of dried meat left over from the other day. It was probably smarter to finish that and keep our expenses down for now, but I was hungry enough that I at least wanted someplace to sit down and stuff my face in peace.

"Hey, Rudeus! Look at that!"

Eris's voice was full of excitement. Curious as to what she'd spotted, I looked up to find that the inner walls of the crater had begun shining faintly; the light seemed to be growing brighter by the second.

"This is amazing! I've never seen anything like it before!"

By the time the sun set completely, the crater's walls were

brilliantly illuminating the stone and clay buildings of the city. It felt like we'd stumbled into a lit-up amusement park.

"Wow. That's really something, isn't it?"

Of course, I'd spent my previous life in a place that never got completely dark at any time, so I wasn't quite as awestruck as Eris. Still, this was definitely a magical spectacle. Why were the walls shining like that anyway?

"Ah. Those are the illuminators."

"Hm? You know something about this, Raiden?"

"Raiden? Who's that? Hm. Was there a Sword God a few generations ago with that name...?"

Naturally, the reference was completely lost on Ruijerd. There probably wasn't a single person in this entire world who would have understood it. Kind of depressing.

"Sorry. I used to know someone by that name, and he knew all sorts of weird things, so... It was just a slip of the tongue."

"I see."

Ruijerd reached down and patted me gently on the head, like a man comforting a child who'd reminisced about a deceased parent.

Uh, just for the record, Raiden isn't my dad's name or anything. My old man's named Pat or Pablo or something like that. Pretty decent father, pretty crappy human being.

"Anyway, what are these illuminator things?"

"They're a variety of magic stone."

"How do they work?"

"They absorb light during the day, then release it like this once it's dark. They shine for less than half as long as the daylight hours, though."

So they were basically solar-powered lights? I didn't see anything like these back in Asura. It was surprising they weren't in broader usage, considering how convenient they sounded.

"So why don't people use these all over the place?"

"Mainly, it's because the stones themselves are rather rare."

"Huh? Looks like they've got a ton of them here, though..." It had

to take a huge number of those things to light up an entire city like this, right?

“The Great Demon Empress apparently had them brought here at the height of her power. You see that over there?” Ruijerd pointed to the broken fortress at the center of the city, shining faintly in the light of the stones. “It was all so her castle would glow beautifully in the night.”

“Wow. That seems a little...excessive.” An image of the Demon Empress popped unbidden into my mind. It was Eris in a dominatrix outfit, shrieking, *“More light! I need more light, so that the world may know my beauty!”*

“Doesn’t anybody try to steal them or anything?”

“I’ve heard it’s forbidden, but I don’t know the details.”

Right. This was Ruijerd’s first time in Rikarisu, too, after all. The stones seemed to be positioned fairly high up the crater’s walls, so maybe it was tricky to get to them unless you could fly.

“At the time, the project was widely condemned as a selfish waste, but I suppose it’s proven useful in the end.”

“Hmm. Maybe the Empress actually did it for the good of her citizens.”

“That I highly doubt. The woman was infamous for her decadence and self-indulgence.”

Ooh. I like the sound of those words. If this lady’s still alive somewhere, I’d love to meet her. We’re definitely talking about a sexy succubus type here.

“Hey, sometimes truth’s stranger than fiction, right?”

“Is that some sort of human proverb?”

“Yep. Think about it though. The Superd don’t have a great reputation either, but they’re actually kind-hearted people, aren’t they?”

Ruijerd patted my head affectionately. I wasn’t sure how I felt about being petted like this at my age, but...let’s think this over, shall we? Yes, I was basically in my mid-forties, mentally speaking. But this guy was in his 560s. Just chop off a digit if it’s too hard to wrap your head around that. Now we’ve got the equivalent of a four-year-old being patted by a fifty-six-year-old. That’s nice and heartwarming,

right?

“Hey, Rudeus! Why don’t we go check that place out?!” Eris said, pointing at the ruined, jet-black castle looming ominously against the night sky.

“Not tonight, Eris,” I said. “Let’s find an inn.”

“Oh, come on! We can just take a little look around!”

Well, now I’d got her pouting. It was charming enough that I was tempted to indulge her, but based on what Ruijerd said earlier, this light wasn’t going to last forever. The last thing we needed was to find ourselves plunged into total darkness just as we reached the castle.

“I’ve been feeling kind of worn out lately, Eris. I’d rather head to an inn.”

“Huh? Are you all right?”

I wasn’t lying. It probably had something to do with the fact that I wasn’t used to traveling, but I’d been feeling kind of sluggish for the last few days. I could still move just fine in battle, so it hadn’t been a major issue yet. Still, I did seem to be getting tired more quickly than usual. Maybe the stress was getting to me. “I’m fine, Eris. It’s nothing too serious.”

“Really? Well, all right then... I guess I’ll have to be patient.”

Now *that* was a phrase I never would’ve expected to hear from Miss Eris Boreas Greyrat. The girl really had come a long way in the last few years, hadn’t she?

We settled on a place called the Wolfclaw Inn. It had a total of twelve rooms, and the rate was five stone coins per night. The building itself had seen better days, but they openly welcomed beginner adventurers, and the price was definitely fair. For an extra stone coin, they provided morning and evening meals, and if you were an adventuring party with more than two people staying in a single room, they waived that fee altogether. As part of that newbie-friendly strategy, the rate stayed the same no matter how many beds you used.

Their front lobby also doubled as a little tavern, with a handful of

tables and a few counter seats as well. When we walked in, one of the tables was occupied by a group of three young adventurers, which didn't strike me as surprising.

The word "young" was relative here, of course. They were probably older than I was, maybe about Eris's age. All of them were boys, and all of them were staring at us without making any attempt to hide it.

"What should we do?" said Ruijerd, shooting me a glance. He was presumably asking if we were going to put on another show.

"Let's not," I replied after a moment's thought. "This is where we're sleeping, right? I'd rather be able to relax here." There was no telling how many nights we'd actually be spending in this particular inn, but these boys were still children by Ruijerd's standards. If we stayed under the same roof for long, they'd naturally come to learn that he was a good-hearted guy.

"We're a party of three. We'll be here three days at least."

"Yeah, fine. You want the meals or no?"

The innkeeper here didn't seem to be the friendliest. "Yeah. Meals, too, please." I handed over enough coins to cover our first three days upfront. The free food thing was definitely a nice bonus. This left us with one iron coin, three scrap iron coins, and two stone coins...the equivalent of 132 stone coins, in total.

"H-hey, are you a rookie adventurer too?"

As I was listening to the innkeeper explain the rules and such, one of the newbies wandered over and spoke to Eris. It was a kid with white hair and a horn sticking out of his forehead; you could probably have classified him as a "pretty boy," if you were feeling generous.

The other two...weren't bad either, I guess. One of them was a sturdy-looking, muscular guy with four arms, and the other had a beak for a mouth and feathers where his hair should be. They were all relatively handsome, although in different ways. If Horn-head was a normal-type Prettymon, Four-arms was a fighting-type, and Beak-boy was a flying-type.

"W-we're pretty new to this ourselves actually. Want to come eat with us maybe?"

Oh wow. He's actually hitting on her. This little punk was pretty

damn precocious, huh? Too bad his voice was trembling. It was kind of adorable, in a way.

“We can probably give you some advice on picking jobs and stuff, you know?”

“...Hmph.” Eris’s only response to the boy’s offer was to turn her face away. *Way to go, girl! Give that little flirt the cold shoulder!*

Well, not like she can even understand what he’s saying.

“C’mon, just for a bit? Your little brother over there can come too.”

“...”

Just as I felt like I should intervene, Eris abruptly glanced across the room and began walking away from the boy. I recognized the technique of course. It was something she’d learned in Edna’s etiquette lessons...a basic move from the *Art of Avoiding Annoying Aristocrats!* Now then, how was the kid going to play this? At this point, a gentleman would get the message and back down gracefully...

“Hey, don’t ignore me.”

Horn-head was evidently not a gentleman. Clearly irritated, he reached out and grabbed the bottom of Eris’s hood. The kid yanked Eris backward, but she had enough lower-body strength to keep her balance. As you might expect from an adventurer, he seemed to be relatively strong himself.

Unfortunately, there was a cheap piece of cloth caught up in the middle of this power struggle. With an ugly ripping sound, Eris’s hood gave way.

“...Huh?”

Eris looked down at the damage. There were tiny tears all along the hood’s bottom edge, where the seams had pulled apart.

I think I actually *heard* her snap.

“What the *hell* d’you think you’re doing?!”

A shrill cry, loud enough to shake the inn to its rafters, served as the starting bell. Twirling around, Eris fired off a Boreas Punch. This was a turning blow she’d learned from Sauros and perfected in the course of her training with Ghislaine; the poor kid never saw it coming. Her fist caught him square in the face, and his head jerked back so far

that it almost looked like she'd broken his neck.

The kid fell spinning backward, hit the back of his head against the floor, and was instantly unconscious.

I was a total amateur, but even I could tell that blow had some serious power behind it. You could almost hear the world's strongest death row convict muttering, "What a punch." *Kinda serves you right for being so pushy, man.* Hopefully the kid had learned his lesson and would never again do anything so foolhardy as speaking to Eris. Sometimes education can be a painful process.

Anyway, his two friends were presumably going to come charging in at this point. I probably needed to step in...

"Who do you think you are anyway?! You've got some nerve touching *me!*"

But to my surprise, Eris wasn't done yet. This time, she unleashed the Boreas Kick...another highly sophisticated technique she'd learned from Sauros and perfected under Ghislaine. Her foot smacked into the solar plexus of her second victim.

"Gah!"

Four-arms moaned in agony and sank to his knees. Eris promptly drove her knee into his chin, sending him flying backward.

"Huh? Wha— Huh?!"

It didn't seem like Beak-boy had fully processed what was happening yet, but as Eris rushed toward him, he reached reflexively for the sword at his hip. That seemed a little overboard, so I quickly tried intervening with magic.

As it turned out, though, Eris was the only one *really* going overboard here. Before Beak-boy could even draw his weapon, she smacked her fist viciously into his chin. I'd never seen a bird's eyes roll back in its head before, but apparently there was a first time for everything.

In mere seconds, Eris had totally immobilized all three of her opponents.

She stalked back to where Horn-head lay unconscious and kicked his head like a soccer ball. The first blow jolted the boy awake, but he couldn't do anything except curl up in the fetal position. Eris proceeded to kick him over and over again. "That...was...the...first...piece...of..."

clothing...Rudeus...ever...bought...me!"

Oh my! Miss Eris! Do I really mean that much to you?! It was just a cheap little thing to cover up that hair of yours, you know... Goodness, you're going to make this old man blush!

Eris kicked the boy over onto his back and reached down to grab one of his legs. Her face was twisted with rage. "You'll regret this until the day you die! I'm going to stomp that thing into mush!"

What *thing* was she referring to, you might wonder? I was too afraid to ask.

Horn-head didn't know what she was saying, of course, but he seemed to understand what she intended to do. He started yelping apologies, begging for help, and trying desperately to squirm away. But his words were meaningless to Eris, and they wouldn't have made a difference either way. Eris always finished what she started. The girl was nothing if not thorough. This kid was about to meet with the same fate I might have suffered three years earlier, had I failed to escape her wrath.

"Stop it, Eris!"

At this point, I finally managed to step in and intervene. Everything had happened so quickly that I'd been too startled to react immediately. "Down, girl! Down! Calm yourself!"

"What's your problem, Rudeus?! Why are you stopping me?!"

I'd grabbed Eris from behind, but she was still thrashing around in my arms, trying to bring her foot down on the boy. What part of the boy specifically, one might ask? The answer was too horrible to contemplate.

"We can just repair the hood! I'll sew it up for you, okay? So cut the guy a break! You're going way too far here!"

"Oh, whatever! Hmph!"

Fortunately, my desperate pleas got through to Eris in the end. She stopped fighting and stomped back over to Ruijerd with her face still full of fury.

Ruijerd, incidentally, had been sitting in a chair at the counter and watching all of this unfold with a small smile on his face. "Ruijerd, come on! Don't just sit there next time this happens!"

“Hm? It was only a children’s fight, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, but the grown-ups are supposed to *stop* those!”

Especially when it’s such a total mismatch...

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m f-fine...”

Feeling a bit sympathetic despite myself, I cast Healing on the battered boy and helped him to his feet. “Sorry about that. She can’t speak Demon-God.”

“Th-that scared the heck out of me... Wh-Why’d she get so mad anyway?”

“Well, she doesn’t like being pestered, and I think that hood is pretty important to her.”

“R-right... Uh, would you mind telling her I’m sorry?”

I glanced over at Eris. She’d taken off her hood, and was staring at the huge tear in it while grinding her teeth furiously. She was definitely in her “never forgive, never forget” mode right now. I hadn’t seen her like this since the very first day we met. I half-expected to see little cartoon clouds of smoke coming out her ears.

“Sorry, but if I spoke to her right now, I think she’d punch me too.”

“Uh, wow. She’s cute, but kinda scary, huh...”

Honestly, I’d thought the girl had grown more civilized recently, but maybe it was only an act. Kinda depressing, since I’d just been patting myself on the back about how far she’d come. “Well, yeah, she’s definitely cute. And that’s why you probably shouldn’t talk to her unless you have a good reason, okay?”

“R-right. Sure...”

“Also, if you ever feel the urge to try and get revenge for this, I’d advise against it. I stepped in today since the whole thing was just an accident, but next time you might actually die.” Not exactly subtle, but I wanted to make sure he knew where we stood.

The boy's eyes widened, and he rubbed at his nose, then checked the back of his head for lumps. After a few moments, he seemed to calm down. "My name's Kurt. What's yours?"

"I'm Rudeus Greyrat. Oh, and she's Eris."

At this point, the two others, who Eris had punished for their friend's misdeeds, came up to introduce themselves as well. The four-armed muscleman was Bachiro, and Beak-boy's real name was Gablin.

Once we'd finished exchanging our names, these two took up positions on either side of Kurt, and the little group struck up a dramatic pose.

"Together, we are...the Tokurabu Village Toughs!"

"..."

Were these kids trying to pull off an Athena Exclamation or what? *Talk about lame. And you're calling yourself "toughs"? Seriously? What are you, a biker gang from fifty years ago or something? In fact, is this Tokurabu place even on any maps?*

"We're on track to hit rank D soon! We were thinking it was about time we found a girl magician to round out the party, you know? That's why I came over."

"A girl magician...?" That didn't make much sense. I was the only magician in our party. *It's not like Eris is wearing a wizard robe or anything...oh. Wait a second...*

"Did you assume Eris was a magician because of the hood she had on?"

"Well, yeah. Only spellcasters wear stuff like that, yeah?"

"She's carrying a sword, you know..."

"Huh? Oh, wow. You're right." Apparently Kurt hadn't even noticed. He seemed like the type who only saw the things he wanted to see. "But *you're* a magician, right? I mean, you can use healing spells and everything. That's pretty awesome."

"Yeah, spells are basically what I do."

"Hey, why don't you both join up with us then?"

Wait, you think we're going to join your gang? Seriously? Didn't you learn anything from that little episode earlier?

“Just so you know...if I joined up, that guy over there would be coming too.” I pointed over at Ruijerd, who was busy lecturing Eris about something or other; she looked a bit sulky, but was nodding at his words.

“Huh? That guy’s in your party too?”

“Oh, absolutely. His name’s Ruijerd.”

“Ruijerd...? What’s your party called anyway?”

“Dead End.”

The boys stared at me with undisguised bewilderment. They were obviously wondering what the hell we were thinking.

“Uh, is it really a good idea to use a name like that?”

“Well, we got approval from the man himself.”

“Suuure...”

Yeah, I know it sounds like a joke, but I’m actually telling the literal truth here...

“It’s just a name, right? Point is, Eris and I are already taken, so we can’t join up with you guys.” It was hard to imagine we’d get anything out of teaming up with these kids anyway. We weren’t here to run around playing make-believe.

“Oh yeah? Guess that’s your loss then. We’re gonna make a big splash in this town, you know? Don’t come beggin’ us to let you in the party once we’re famous.”

Is he for real? Well...nothing wrong with a bunch of fresh-faced youngsters heading to the big city with their heads full of dreams, right? Those grizzled veterans back at the Adventurers’ Guild probably welcomed kids like these with warm, indulgent smiles.

“You talk awful big for someone who just got his butt handed to him by a kid...”

“Hey! She, uh, just caught me off guard, man.”

“You gonna trot out that excuse when some monster ambushes you in the wilderness too?”

“Gah...”

Yeah, I think I won that one. Feels good, man. Hard to argue with the mental image of a Pax Coyote ripping out your throat, right?

I left the “Tokurabu Village Toughs” to nurse their bruised egos.

After dinner, we headed up to our room, where three fur beds awaited us.

“Phew...” Sighing softly, I took a seat on mine. Today really had been exhausting. I wasn’t in the best condition to start with, and we’d met so many people, heard a ton of laughter, and endured so much mockery. Even when you’re consciously playing a part, that stuff takes a toll on you.

Eris was gazing out our window at the city, which was growing darker by the minute. That ruined castle was pretty captivating, sure, but you’d think the girl was a tourist or something. We had all sorts of things to worry about right now, didn’t we? Did she expect me to deal with everything all by myself or what?

Okay, no. I needed to stop being so negative. Eris trusted me; that’s why she wasn’t overthinking things right now. It wasn’t as if she was being a spoiled brat or anything. *Now if only she’d stop getting into pointless fights...*

I fell back onto my bed, looked up at the ceiling and thought about what came next.

First and foremost, we needed money. This room was costing us fifteen stone coins a night for the three of us. We needed to earn at least that much per day at a bare minimum. But based on what I’d seen earlier, F-rank jobs paid out about five stone coins, and even E-rank jobs were only worth one scrap iron coin or so. As a solo adventurer, you could probably just tackle one F-rank job per day to cover the cost of your lodgings, then start saving some cash once you ranked up into more lucrative work. F- and E-rank tasks were mainly odd jobs around the city, but at D rank you started getting more requests to gather materials and such. Basically, the system was set up so that you could save up some money doing easy work, then buy some equipment to tackle more dangerous jobs.

It was well thought-out, but...there were three of us.

Including the cost of lunch and everyday goods, we’re probably looking

at twenty stone coins a day on average. If we handle one task a day, we're probably looking at a net loss of ten to fifteen stone coins. And we've got 132 left at this point...

We'd be flat broke in under two weeks. That wasn't much of a cushion at all. We needed to be completing three or more jobs per day to stay out of the red.

If we could split up, it'd probably be possible to pull in more than twenty stone coins doing simple jobs. But if we left Ruijerd by himself, there was a risk his real identity would be exposed. And Eris couldn't even speak the local language, so she'd have a hard time on her own. She had a short temper too... She might end up getting into fights with her clients.

More importantly, we couldn't spread the word about Ruijerd unless we worked as a group.

Once we ranked up, money would be much less of an issue. Monster-slaying tasks were right up Ruijerd and Eris's alley. Once we could take those, we'd be sitting pretty in no time.

That said, jobs of that sort were all rank C or higher. Basically, if we managed to hit rank D within the next two weeks or so, everything would probably be okay. That wasn't going to be possible if we only took on one task a day though. I'd forgotten to ask how many completed jobs it took before you could rank up, but...at the very least, the guild clearly didn't let you hop up the ladder just because you were a powerful fighter. They expected everyone to work their way forward step by plodding step.

It didn't help that I wasn't in the best condition right now. This probably wasn't anything serious, but there was a chance Eris or I might come down with some illness I couldn't cure with basic Detoxification spells.

Also, it was hard to know how much we'd need to spend on irregular purchases. We'd have to keep buying hair dye for Ruijerd periodically for one thing.

And then there were our clothes. We couldn't keep wearing the same ones forever. Our outfits were made of durable, high-quality materials, and they didn't take too long to clean when I used magic to dry them. But doing it that way was bad for the fabric, and they'd eventually get ripped and torn. The earlier we could get some extra sets,

the better. Soap would be really nice too. Eris and I had just been wiping ourselves off with a rag soaked in hot water for a while.

There were probably all sorts of other basic supplies we'd realize we needed too. Money was going to be an issue.

Oh, right. Maybe we could take out a loan or something? There had to be at least a couple moneylenders somewhere in this city, right?

No. We probably didn't want to get into debt if we could help it. Not until we had a clear way to pay it off at least. I guess I could always sell Aqua Heartia, but...that was going to be my last resort. I didn't want to lose the first birthday present Eris had ever given me.

Wow, look at me anguishing over the family budget. Never thought the day would come...

As I recalled...in my previous incarnation, I'd been known to ward off my parents' attempts at discussing money matters by pounding my fists on the floor like an overgrown toddler. Talk about a nauseating memory. I'd have to make an effort to forget about that one.

I also found myself remembering the look on Paul's face when I asked him to pay for both Sylphie and me to attend school together. Also somewhat embarrassing in retrospect. I really had been a bit too casual about money in the past.

All right. This isn't the time to be learning valuable life lessons. Let's focus, please.

What was the most efficient way for us to earn money? Should we try to complete as many jobs per day as possible? It might be easier to just head out into the plains and hunt monsters for their raw materials, honestly. I didn't have to get too fixated on the adventurer thing.

But if we went that route, we wouldn't have many chances to build up Dead End's reputation around the city. Moving up the ladder as adventurers would be the better way to do that. Hitting a high rank would make things easier going forward...and we'd probably get a better price for raw materials going through the Guild too.

Could we get ourselves established before our money ran out though? Maybe it'd be smarter to put helping Ruijerd out on hold until our situation was relatively stable?

Damn. I'm just going in circles at this point...

I couldn't find a clear-cut answer here. Making money and

improving Ruijerd's reputation at the same time wasn't going to be easy.

Hopefully I can figure something out...

Nothing came to mind before I fell asleep, though.

I was dreaming. In my dream, I found myself in a pure-white void. I could sense I'd reverted into a duller and more pathetic version of myself.

Not this again. Sigh...

A vaguely obscene-looking little jerk appeared before my eyes.

What is it this time? I asked. *Can we wrap this up as quickly as possible, please?*

"You're as hostile as ever, I see. My advice about relying on Ruijerd worked out for you, didn't it? He got you to the nearest city safe and sound."

Yeah, I guess. But knowing Ruijerd, he probably would have tagged along and protected us from a distance even if we ran away from him.

"Goodness. It certainly sounds like you trust *him*. Why are you still so suspicious of me then?"

You seriously don't know the answer to that question? Did you forget the part where you called yourself a god?

"Oh well, I suppose it doesn't really matter. I've got some more advice for you, Rudeus."

Fine, fine. Would you please just get it over with? I hate the sound of your voice, and I hate being here too. I hate feeling like the time I spent as Rudeus was just a dream. I hate feeling like I've gone right back to being some useless, pathetic loser. If you're going to make me hear you out, I wish you'd just say your piece upfront.

"Somebody's awfully submissive today."

I'm just going to end up in the palm of your hand no matter what, right?

"Don't be silly, Rudeus. All your choices are entirely your own."

Can you stop prattling on and get to the point?

“Oh, all right... Listen carefully, young Rudeus. Take on that task to find the lost pet, and you’ll soon find yourself with much less to worry about...”

With the Man-God’s final words echoing in my ears, I felt myself slipping back into unconsciousness.

When I woke up, it was still the middle of the night. Talk about a bad dream.

I’d had about enough of these divine messages, to be honest. The timing here was incredibly suspicious. Pixel-face had picked the perfect moment to take advantage of my uncertainty. Classic evil god stuff really. We totally had a MOCCOS on our hands here.

Sighing softly, I looked over to my left.

Ruijerd was asleep. For some reason, he’d opted to lean against the far wall with his arms around his spear, rather than occupying his bed.

I looked to my right...and realized Eris was awake as well. She was sitting on her bed, hugging her knees, staring out at the darkness.

I rose quietly, walked over, sat down at her side, and looked out the window with her. The moon was out. This world only had one too.

“Can’t sleep, huh?”

“Yeah,” Eris replied after a momentary pause. She hadn’t taken her eyes off the window.

“Hey, Rudeus?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think we’ll make it home...?”

All of a sudden, her voice was painfully anxious. “Oh...”

I was ashamed of my own cluelessness. I’d thought Eris was her usual self. I’d thought she wasn’t even nervous. I’d thought she was simply enjoying this situation...our “adventure.”

But that wasn't true at all. She was afraid too. She'd just been hiding it from me. The stress must've been building up inside her for days. No wonder she'd gotten into that stupid fight earlier. That should have tipped me off right away, if I weren't a total moron.

"Yes. Absolutely." I gently wrapped an arm around Eris's shoulders, and she promptly put her head against my shoulder.



She hadn't taken a proper bath in days, so the faint scent wafting from her hair was new to me. It wasn't unpleasant though. Not at all. Which was kind of a problem, since my rambunctious little buddy began threatening to act up again.

Control yourself, Rudeus... Until we make it home, you're an oblivious protagonist.

This wasn't like the Sylphie thing. There was a reason, however flimsy, that I needed to hold myself back. And in any case, only a scumbag would take advantage of a girl who was feeling this anxious and vulnerable.

"Rudeus...you really will figure something out, right...?"

"Don't worry. I'll get us back home, no matter what it takes."

Oh man, this little lady's too cute when she gets all meek. No wonder Sauros spoiled her rotten. I wonder what happened to the old man anyway? That flash of light covered the entire Fittoa region, so I guess...

Nah, let's not think about it right now. I've got my hands full with my own problems.

"Let's just focus on doing what we can for now, okay? You should get some sleep, too, Eris. Tomorrow's going to be another busy day."

I patted Eris on the head, got up, and headed back to my own bed. Just as I reached it, my eyes met Ruijerd's. He'd heard our conversation apparently. That was...somewhat embarrassing.

After a moment, though, he just closed his eyes without a word.

Man, what a good guy! Paul probably would've started mercilessly teasing me on the spot. Ruijerd really was a sweetheart. It'd just be plain wrong to put his problems on the backburner.

Speaking of Paul though...I wonder if he's worried about me or anything? I really ought to send a letter telling him that I was alive and well. Although it was hard to know if it'd actually reach him from way out here.

Anyway. Tomorrow we're hunting someone's pet, I guess...

The Man-God's motives were still unclear to me. But for this one time, I was willing to follow his advice without giving it too much thought.

Our first night as adventurers came to a quiet end—with the air in

our little room still thick with anxiety.

Chapter 9: The First Job: The Value of a Life

The Kirib house, located on Rikarisu's Block Two, was a long, single-story building with four separate entrances.

Those who lived there were far from well-off, but they weren't as desperately poor as those who dwelled in the city's slums. By the Demon Continent's standards, they were typical working-class people.

Three shadowy figures—two small, one large—were currently approaching this place.

Strutting boldly along the street, they made their way to one of the building's multiple entrances, indifferent to the gazes of those around them.

"Hello, miss! We've come from the Adventurers' Guild!" The young boy of the group knocked on the door, calling out in a high-pitched voice to the resident within.

There was something unsettling about this. None of the adventurers in this city spoke that politely to anyone. They were a rough, crude bunch by nature.

Still, the gentleness of the boy's voice apparently deceived the resident of this room. The door squeaked open, and a girl of perhaps seven years emerged from within. Her long, lizard-like tail and distinctive forked tongue marked her as a member of the Houga race.

The girl's eyes went wide at the sight of her three unusual visitors, but the boy smiled cheerfully at her. "Hello there! Pleasure to meet you. This is Miss Meicel's residence, correct?"

"Huh? U-uhm..."

"Oh, pardon me. My name is Rudeus, miss. Rudeus of Dead End."

"D-Dead End...?"

This girl, Meicel, was of course familiar with that name. Everyone knew the story of the monstrous Superd warriors who'd fought so fiercely during the Laplace War 400 years ago, slaughtering friend and foe alike. And everyone knew that "Dead End" was the strongest and

most evil of their number. It was said that none who met him lived to tell the tale. Even those who'd only glimpsed him from a distance said they'd only barely managed to escape with their lives. His name struck terror into the hearts of every resident of the Demon Continent; even brawny adventurers who boasted that they could slay any monster single-handedly would shudder just to hear him mentioned.

But Meicel also knew what Dead End was said to look like, and this short, young boy didn't match that description in the slightest.

"We took on your request at the Guild this morning, miss. We're here to find your lost pet. We were hoping to ask you for the details, if you can spare the time."

The name Dead End was terrifying in itself, and the other two people standing behind the boy were a little intimidating. But he spoke to her so politely that it was hard to stay afraid. And from the sound of things, they were adventurers who'd actually taken on the job she'd posted.

"Please... Please find Mii for us."

"Ah, so your pet's name is Mii? That's a very cute name, I must say."

"I came up with it myself."

"Oh really? Well, you've clearly got a knack for naming things, miss."

This compliment earned the boy a bashful smile.

"Now then...do you think you could tell us a bit about Mii maybe?"

Meicel described her pet's appearance, explained that it had disappeared three days ago, added that it hadn't come back home, clarified that it usually came back when she called for it, and mentioned that it was probably hungry since she hadn't fed it. It was a rambling, childish monologue. A typical adult may have rolled their eyes at the girl's babbling and left halfway through; but the young adventurer listened to her with a smile, nodding encouragingly after every heartfelt sentence.

"Understood, miss. We'll go track Mii down right away. Rest assured, you're in good hands with Dead End!"

The boy closed his hand into a fist and stuck his thumb up into

the air; for some reason, the other two behind him did the same. Meicel didn't quite understand, but she imitated them anyway.

Nodding with pleasure, the boy turned around and began walking away. The hooded girl who'd been standing behind him followed; but the taller man of the group squatted down in front of Meicel to pat her gently on the head.

"You have my word—we'll find your pet, Meicel. Be patient just a little longer."

He had a big scar running across his face; there was a jewel on his forehead; and his hair was a strange, spotty blue. It was a little scary to look him in the face...but his hand was warm and gentle.

Meicel nodded. "O-okay. I'll be waiting."

"Don't worry. We'll be back before you know it."

As the taller man stood up to take his leave, Meicel called out to him.

"Uhm... What's your name, Mister?"

"Ruijerd," the man replied, then turned and walked off with the others.

Blushing faintly, Meicel murmured that name to herself.

Rudeus

Our first meeting with the client had gone off very nicely, all in all. I'd just been imitating a door-to-door salesman who frequently stopped by my house in my previous life, but it seemed to work better than expected. It was fine for the other adventurers to laugh at us, but we needed our clients to think of us first and foremost as good people. That meant we needed to treat them kindly and politely.

"I see you're capable of playing more than one role," said Ruijerd as we strode away victorious. "Quite impressive, Rudeus."

"Right back at you, Ruijerd. Your bit at the end there was just perfect."

“My bit at the end? What are you talking about?”

“The part where you patted her on the head as you spoke to her, obviously.” That had been a total ad-lib. I was sweating bullets there for a second, but the results had been very impressive.

“Oh, I see. What was so good about that?”

Maybe the part where she was gazing up at you with a big blush on her face? Come on, man. I woulda been sorely tempted to kidnap her if I was in your shoes!

It wasn't a good idea to just come out and say that to someone who loved children as much as Ruijerd, though. He probably would've spent the next half-hour sternly rebuking me. So instead, I adopted a joking tone of voice and nudged him playfully in the thigh with my elbow. “Heheh. C'mon, Boss. You had that chick wrapped around yer little finger! Eheheh...”

Ruijerd smiled dubiously and denied this, his voice a bit uncertain.

“Eheheh! Don't be so modest, Boss! If ya pushed a little harder, that girl woulda been putty in yer—Ow!”

I was rudely interrupted by a smack upside the head. I turned to find Eris pouting at me. “Stop laughing like that! Wasn't that stupid ‘Boss’ stuff supposed to be an act?!”

Apparently, she wasn't a big fan of my leering impression of a lowlife. Ever since the kidnapping, Eris had despised “vulgar” people. Back in Roa, she'd grimaced every time we passed someone dressed like a thug in the street. I was only kidding around with Ruijerd, but I guess she didn't find it too amusing. “Sorry about that.”

“Honestly! You're a member of the Greyrat family, aren't you? Don't be so uncouth!”

It took an effort of will not to burst out laughing at that one. *Did you hear that, ma'am? Eris just told me off for being “uncouth”! Yes, that Eris! The little lady who used to feel the need to open every door she found by kicking it! She's certainly grown more refined lately, don't you think?*

Still...if she wanted to say things like that to me, shouldn't she stop getting into barroom brawls with strangers first?

Hmm. Hard to say actually. Based on what I'd seen of Sauros, maybe flipping out and punching someone in the face fell within the

bounds of acceptable behavior...? No, no. Surely not...

After giving it a moment's thought, I realized I had no earthly idea where "uncouth" stopped and "couth" began for Asuran nobles. Accordingly, I changed the subject. "In any case, Ruijerd...do you think we can find this pet?"

Based on what we'd heard from Meicel, Mii seemed to be a cat. It was black, and had been Meicel's companion ever since she was very young. It was also likely on the larger side. Meicel had stretched her arms out wide to demonstrate its size; assuming that wasn't an exaggeration, Mii had to be about as big as a full-grown Shiba Inu, which was pretty remarkable for a house cat.

"Of course. I gave the girl my word after all." With this promisingly decisive declaration, Ruijerd strode forward, taking up the lead.

He was moving with confidence, but I was still feeling a little nervous. I knew he had a powerful built-in radar for living things, but it couldn't be easy to track down one specific animal in a city that was full of them. "Do you have a plan or something?"

"Animals move in very predictable ways, Rudeus. Look here."

I, peering at the ground where Ruijerd pointed, I could just barely make out the outline of a small pawprint. Talk about impressive. I never would have noticed that in a million years.

"So if we follow these tracks, you think we'll find it?"

"No. These are likely from a different animal. The paws of her cat wouldn't be this small."

True, this did look more like the pawprint of an ordinary or even smallish cat...though I did somewhat suspect the girl may have been overstating Mii's size somewhat.

"Hm. So then..."

"It seems like a different cat has been pushing its way into our target's home territory."

"What? Really?"

"It certainly seems that way. Her cat's scent is fading, so another one's moved in."

Wait. Uh...can he actually pick up on the smells they marked their

territories with or something?

“This way.”

Ruijerd had apparently reached some sort of conclusion that he didn't feel the need to share with us. He strode off down a side street and I quietly tagged along. It felt like we were making progress, although I wasn't quite sure *how*. Maybe this was how it felt to be poor old clueless Doctor Watson.

No worries, folks! We've got the best sleuth on the continent on the case! He'll track down the criminals with his peerless investigative techniques, knock them flat with Demon-style Baritsu, and squeeze out a confession with a few pointed questions! Make way for Great Detective Ruijerd!

“Found it. This is probably the one,” Ruijerd said, pointing at a non-descript section of the street. I couldn't have told you what he'd “found” or why he felt the need to add on that “probably.” There weren't any pawprints here that I could see.

“Follow me.” Ruijerd set off again at once, moving forward steadily.

Without hesitation, he led us through a series of side streets that seemed to get narrower and narrower as we went. If nothing else, these *looked* like the type of alleys you'd expect a cat to be slinking through. I still had no idea what sort of a trail Ruijerd was following, but...it seemed to be going smoothly so far.

“Look at this. There's signs of a struggle here.”

We'd come to a halt in a dead-end alley. Whatever “signs” Ruijerd had found there, they were too subtle for me; I couldn't see any bloodstains or scratches in the dirt.

“This way.” Turning on his heel, Ruijerd took the lead once again. It kind of felt like Eris and I were just along for the ride. Talk about a low-stress job.

We passed through a few side streets, cut across a boulevard, and headed into another side street. From there, we made our way into a back alley, then passed onto *another* side street. And so on, and so forth.

After moving briskly through the city's maze-like streets for some time, we took a sudden turn into a very different part of town. Everything here was run-down and desolate. The buildings were crude,

unpainted, and crumbling from neglect. Some of the men we passed shot us ominous looks; there were people lying sprawled out along the street, and many of the children were in filthy rags.

We were in a slum now. The change hadn't been a gradual one, either. It was more like we'd stumbled right into the heart of it. Within moments, I was on high alert. "Eris, be ready to draw your sword at any time."

"...Why?"

"Just to be on the safe side. Also, keep an eye on the people we pass in the street, and try to watch your back."

"Uh...okay!"

It felt like a good idea to put Eris on her guard as well. We probably weren't in much real danger with Ruijerd around, but I didn't want us slipping up due to complacency. The two of us really ought to protect ourselves.

With that thought in mind, I reached into my inner breast pocket and clutched tightly at my money pouch. I didn't have that much cash to lose, but it would still be a disaster if someone swiped it.

"...Tch."

Sometimes, one of the rougher-looking guys we passed would stare menacingly at Ruijerd, but when he glared right back, they tended to click their tongues and look away. In this sort of neighborhood, people who could throw a good punch probably inspired more respect than adventurers.

"Is this really where the cat went, Ruijerd?"

"We'll see."

That reply wasn't particularly reassuring. We weren't just wandering around aimlessly here, were we?

No, no. Ruijerd's just being his tight-lipped self. I'm sure he's got us on the right track. Let's just keep telling ourselves that.

We ended up walking through the slums for some time, but eventually Ruijerd drew up short in front of a certain building. "This is it right here."

A crude flight of stairs in front of us led down to a nondescript door. It looked like the entrance to some underground bar inhabited by

punk-rockers with weird haircuts. But there wasn't any thumping music floating up from below, or bald guys with sunglasses standing by the door to keep an eye on the clientele.

On the other hand, there *was* a thick animal stench coming from down there—the sort of smell you might catch a whiff of while walking past a big pet shop.

In a less literal sense, you could practically smell crime in the air.

“How many people are inside there, Ruijerd?”

“None. There are a large number of animals, however.”

“All right then. Shall we?” If there was no one in there right now, there was no reason to hesitate.

The door at the bottom of the stairs was locked, naturally, but I opened it easily enough with a bit of Earth magic.

Shooting a quick glance around the area to make sure no one was watching, I slipped in, waited for Ruijerd and Eris to follow, then closed and locked the door from the inside. Kind of felt like we were burglars or something.

At a glance, all I could see was a long, dark corridor stretching out in front of us.

“Can you keep an eye out behind us, Eris?”

“No problem.”

Presumably Ruijerd would know if anyone came in after us, but it couldn't hurt to be extra careful.

The three of us moved deeper into the building, with Ruijerd in the lead once again. A single door at the end of the main corridor opened into a small room, with another door at its far end. As we passed through this second door, a deafening chorus of animal cries instantly filled the air.

We'd reached the room at the very back of the building. It was absolutely packed with cages.

There were countless animals locked up in here—cats, dogs, and a wide variety of creatures I'd never even seen before, all crammed into a space about the size of a high school classroom.

“What *is* this?” Eris said, her voice trembling.

My first thoughts were roughly along those lines as well...but it also occurred to me that given the number of animals in here, there was a good chance the one we were looking for was among them.

“Ruijerd, is the cat in here?”

“Yes,” he responded instantly. “That’s the one.”

He was pointing at something that looked *very* much like a black panther.

The thing was huge. Absolutely huge. It had to be twice as big as Meicel had indicated with her arms.

“U-uh, is that seriously the one we’re looking for?”

“Of course it is. Look at its collar.”

The beast did, in fact, have a collar. And the name “Mii” was, in fact, printed on it.

“Wow. I guess...it really is Mii, huh?”

Technically, we’d now completed our task. Once we took this panther out of its cage and dragged it back to the little girl, we were done.

That said, uh...what about all these other guys?

There were quite a few of them with collars around their neck or bracelets on their legs, and some of those had names written on them. In other words, a whole bunch of these animals were obviously pets. I’d also noticed a big, careless pile of ropes and things that looked like muzzles in one corner of the room. The ropes, in particular, seemed to suggest some *capturing* had been going on here.

Was someone snatching unique pets off the street and selling them off to other people, maybe? It seemed like a perfectly plausible scheme.

I had no idea if there were any specific laws about this sort of thing in this world, but it had to be some sort of crime... I mean, it was a form of theft, at the very least.

“Mm...” Suddenly, Ruijerd turned his head back toward the entrance.

Eris reacted at almost exactly the same time. “Someone’s come in after us.”

The animals were making such a racket that I personally hadn’t

heard a thing. Ruijerd aside, I was genuinely impressed Eris had even noticed.

That said, what were we going to do about this? It wouldn't take much time for them to get here from the entrance. Was running an option? No, not really—the only way out was through that corridor.

“Okay. Let's capture them, I guess.”

I didn't really consider the option of just talking things over. We'd broken into this place like a bunch of thieves after all. It did *seem* to be a crime scene, but there was still a possibility it had some legitimate purpose, which would make us the criminals here.

Right now, we needed to take these people into custody. If they were good guys, we could cajole them into keeping quiet about this, and if they were bad guys, we could punch them until they promised not to talk.

A few minutes later, I was standing over three people—two men, one woman—who were lying unconscious on the floor in a corner of the room.

After restraining them with handcuffs I made using Earth magic, I splashed some water on their faces to wake them. One of the men immediately began yelping and yowling, so I promptly gagged him with a rag that was lying nearby.

The other two kept quiet, but I ended up gagging both of them as well. It was better to be fair and impartial with these things.

“...Hm.”

With all this done, I found myself pondering a certain question: *How exactly did it come to this?*

I mean, we'd taken on a simple E-rank job to find a lost cat. Nothing too dramatic. Ruijerd said he could handle it, so I had him take charge, and ended up following him into some sort of slum. In said slum, we broke into a building with tons of animals inside it. At which point we found ourselves taking multiple people captive...which was absolutely *not* what we were here to do.

This had to be the Man-God's fault, right? He obviously foresaw this happening.

What a headache. I really should have gone with some other job.

...Anyway, let's take a careful look at our captives.

Man A:

Orange skin. Compound eyes like a fly, with no whites. He was kind of gross to look at. This was the one who'd started squawking like a cicada when I woke them. He seemed like something of a crude customer...the sort of guy who'd be good in a bar fight.

I was pretty sure I'd seen a picture of his race in Roxy's dictionary, but I couldn't quite recall what they were called. Their saliva was apparently poisonous; I remember wondering if they could even kiss each other.

Man B:

This one had a lizard head, slightly different in shape and coloration from the snake-face we'd run into at the city's front gate. Given his reptilian features, it was hard to read his expression. But I could see intelligence in his eyes, and that made me wary of him.

Woman A:

Another bug-eye type. Her head looked something like a bee's, but I could still tell she was pretty frightened at the moment. I guess her face was in the "gross" category, too, but she had a nice figure, which basically cancelled that out.

Well then. We're not going to make any progress if I just stand here staring at them. Time for a little chat... No, no, let's be honest. This is going to be an interrogation.

Who to start with, though? Who was going to spit out information more willingly, the woman or one of the men? The woman was definitely afraid. If I threatened her a little, there was a chance she may tell me everything right away.

Then again, women were known to lie. Some of them were perfectly capable of telling you ridiculous, incoherent nonsense to get themselves out of trouble. Okay, so probably not all women were like that, of course, but my big sister sure as hell was. It used to make me so angry that I'd have a hard time figuring out what the actual truth was.

Maybe I'd start with one of the men instead.

How about Man A? He was the bulkiest of the group and had a scar on his face... Looked like their best fighter. He was also agitated at the moment. Probably wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, judging from the way he was shouting, "Who the hell are you people?" and, "Take these damn handcuffs off me!" before I gagged him.

Or Man B? It was hard to read much from his face, but he seemed to be observing the three of us carefully. That meant he wasn't stupid. And if he wasn't stupid, he probably had a few good lies worked out in advance in case something like this ever happened.

So, I decided to go with Man A.

It was easier to manipulate someone who'd lost their cool. With a little prodding and a bit of provocation, he'd probably slip up and tell me everything I wanted to know. And hey, if it didn't work out, we could always try the other two.

"I've got a few questions I want you to answer."

When I removed Man A's gag, he glared fiercely up at me...but didn't say a word.

"If you tell us what we want to know, we won't need to get rough wi—bluh?!"

Halfway through my sentence, the guy actually *kicked* me. I'd been squatting down to talk to him, so the blow knocked me totally off balance. Launched backward, I rolled across the floor, only stopping when the back of my head smacked into the wall. Stars flashed across my field of vision.

Ow! Dammit!

Seriously, though, how stupid was this guy? Why would you kick someone who's already got you captured? He must not have even considered what may happen if he made us angry.

"Huh? H-hey, what th... Stop it!"

That was Eris's voice. I jumped to my feet in a blind panic. Had Man A slipped out of his handcuffs while I was thinking things over and somehow taken Eris hostage before Ruijerd could react?

"Wha—"

Nope, Eris was fine. Couldn't say the same for Man A, though. Ruijerd had stuck his spear through the guy's throat. Eris was just looking on, her eyes wide with shock.

Ruijerd twisted his trident sideways as he pulled it back; blood arced through the air and splattered against the wall. The force spun Man A around briefly before he fell face-down to the floor. Blood was pouring from his throat. A dark stain crawled slowly across his back, and a red puddle spread out underneath him. The metallic stench was sickening.

With one final, reflexive twitch, the man stopped moving.

He was dead. He'd died without saying a single word. Ruijerd had murdered him in cold blood.

"Wh... Why... Why did you kill him?" I asked, conscious of the fact that my voice was shaking.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen a person die. Ghislaine had killed to save me and Eris after all. But this was different somehow. For some reason, I was trembling. For some reason, I was deeply afraid.

Why? What's got me so scared?

The fact that a man had died? Ridiculous. People died all the time in this world, for the most trivial of reasons. I was well aware of that.

Maybe it was just because I'd never seen it happen up close and personal before? But in that case, why didn't I react this way when Ghislaine killed those men during that kidnapping incident?

"Because he kicked a child," Ruijerd said, his voice calm and indifferent.

He'd spoken like a man answering the world's most obvious question.

Ah, right. Now I get it. I'm not afraid because I just saw someone die. I'm afraid...because Ruijerd killed that man...without a second thought... just because he kicked me.

I'm afraid of Ruijerd.

Roxy had warned me, hadn't she? "...there are many differences in what's commonly accepted in human culture versus demon culture, so you might not know what words will trigger an outburst." So what was I going to do if Ruijerd ever turned his wrath on me? The man was strong; as strong as Ghislaine, or even stronger. Was it possible for me to beat him with my magic? I could probably put up a fight at least. I'd worked out multiple strategies for head-to-head fights against close-range combat specialists.

For whatever reason, many of the people in my life fell into that category...including Paul, Ghislaine, and Eris. And Ruijerd was probably the single strongest of them. It was hard for me to say with any confidence that I could take him. But if I were fighting to kill from the very start, there were plenty of things I could try.

What if he went after Eris, though? Could I possibly protect her as well?

No. Not a chance.

"Y-you can't kill someone just for that!"

"Why not? The man was evil." Ruijerd was wide-eyed at my flustered objection. He seemed genuinely and totally bewildered.

"Well..." How could I possibly explain this? What did I want from Ruijerd here?

In the first place, why *was* it an issue that he'd killed that man?

I didn't really have a standard sense of morality. Back when I was a shut-in loser, I'd snorted with disdain at preachy phrases like, "it's *wrong* to kill." Hell, I'd barely felt anything when my own parents died. I knew things were going to get rough for me, but at the same time, my general attitude was pure Crystal Boy: "To hell with that crap, dumbass! I'm jackin' off!"

Needless to say, if I tried to feed Ruijerd some cookie-cutter ethical argument, it was going to come out weak and unconvincing.

"Look, there's...a very good reason...you shouldn't go around killing people."

Okay, I'm pretty shaken up. Let's acknowledge that. I'm kind of freaking out.

I'm kind of freaking out, but I'm still going to think this through.

First of all, why was I trembling? Because I was scared. Because I'd seen Ruijerd, who always seemed like such a kind-hearted guy, kill a man without even blinking.

I'd thought the Superd were a peaceful people who'd simply been misunderstood. That clearly wasn't the case. I didn't know about his tribe as a whole, but at the very least, Ruijerd was a killer. He'd been killing his enemies ever since the Laplace War era; this murder was just another typical entry in a long, long list. I couldn't say for certain he'd never turn his spear on Eris or me. I wasn't the sort of pure-hearted, honest person who could earn Ruijerd's respect. Someday, somehow, I'd probably end up getting on his bad side.

It was one thing if he got angry at me. Since we had different ways of thinking, sometimes our opinions would diverge—that was just inevitable. We'd probably get into fights every once in a while.

That said, I wasn't planning to fight him to the *death*. No matter what the situation, our disagreements couldn't escalate into violence. I had to make Ruijerd understand that...here and now, before it was too late.

"Please...listen carefully, Ruijerd."

Problem was, I still couldn't find the right words.

What was I supposed to say, damn it? How could I make him understand? Should I just plead with him not to kill the two of us at least?

Now you're just being stupid.

Just the other day, I'd convinced Ruijerd that I was a warrior, fighting with him as an equal. I wasn't under his protection; I was his comrade. I couldn't start *pleading* with him now. A flat "cut it out" wasn't going to work either. I needed to come up with something that would actually convince him, or this would be completely pointless.

Think, man. Why is Ruijerd with you in the first place? He wants everyone to know the Superd aren't really bloodthirsty devils. And if he goes around killing people, he's only going to make their reputation worse.

That...sounded right. It was the same reason I'd told him to avoid fights with other adventurers. The public already had an awful impression of his people; no matter how many good deeds he did to change that, all his progress would go down the drain if people saw

Ruijerd commit a murder. Everyone would revert to their original assumptions about his kind.

Okay, this was why he couldn't kill people. We didn't want everyone getting the impression that the Superd were a tribe of mindless beasts, right?

"If you keep killing people, it's going to make the reputation of the Superd even worse."

"...Even if the people that I kill are evil?"

"It doesn't matter who. If you're killing *anyone*, that's a problem." I was speaking deliberately now, and choosing my words with care.

"I don't understand, Rudeus."

"When a Superd kills someone, it's not viewed the same way as when someone else does it. It's the equivalent of being slain by a monster."

Ruijerd scowled a bit at that. I guess it sounded like I was badmouthing his people. "...I still don't understand. Why would that be the case?"

"Everyone thinks of you as part of a tribe of vicious devils. They think you're maniacs who kill at the drop of the hat, over even the slightest provocation."

Okay, this did sound harsh...but then again, it really was the general consensus. Our goal was to change that.

"It's easy to go around *telling* people that the Superd aren't really monsters. But if you *prove* the rumors untrue through your actions, you might start changing a ton of minds."

"..."

"On the other hand, you'll ruin everything if you start killing people. Everyone will assume they were right about your race all along."

"Surely that isn't true."

"Is this really not ringing any bells, Ruijerd? Have you ever helped some people out and started getting friendly with them, only to have them suddenly turn on you?"

"...I have."

At this point, I could feel my argument finally coming together. “Well, here’s the thing. If you don’t kill *anyone at all* from now on...”

“Yes?”

“Everyone will realize that the Superd are normal, rational people.”

Was that really true? Would simply refraining from murder be enough to convince the people of this world that his tribe was reasonable?

This wasn’t the time to think about it. I wasn’t *wrong* either way. Ruijerd had obviously killed too many people. The general populace thought the Superd were killers by their very nature. But if he stopped killing, we had a chance to change their minds.

It was logical enough, wasn’t it?

“If you care about your tribe...don’t kill any more people, Ruijerd. Not a single one.”

Normally, you had to make judgment calls about these things. Killing might ordinarily be wrong, but in certain circumstances, it could be justified or even necessary. But I didn’t know the standards by which the residents of this world made those calls, and Ruijerd’s personal criteria were probably...extreme. The man didn’t give you any room for error, and it was hard to know where he drew the line. In that case, it was simplest and safest to just forbid him from killing altogether.

“What if no one’s watching? Wouldn’t it be all right then?”

I had to fight a powerful urge to face-palm. What was he, a grade school kid? Had this guy seriously been alive for 500 years?

“You may think no one’s watching, but people see things anyway.”

“There’s no one else in this building, I assure you.”

Ah, crap. Right. He’s got that stupid eye on his forehead. “There was still someone watching, Ruijerd.”

“From where?”

Right here, man. “Eris and I saw the whole thing, didn’t we?”

“Hm...”

“Don’t kill anyone from now on, please. We don’t want to be

afraid of you, either.”

“...Very well then.”

In the end, I'd basically resorted to the “teary-eyed plea” approach. My words didn't sound entirely convincing, even to myself. Still, Ruijerd nodded, and that was all that mattered.

“Thank you, Ruijerd.”

I bowed my head to him in gratitude, and noticed that my hands were shaking.

Calm down. This sort of thing happens all the time. Deeeep breaths.

“Hoo... haa... hoo... haa...” It was proving difficult to calm myself. My heart didn't want to stop racing. I shot a glance over at Eris, wondering how she was handling all this; to my surprise, she didn't look afraid in the slightest. The look on her face basically said, “You startled me a little there, but I guess a piece of trash like that deserved to die.”

Okay, maybe she wasn't actually thinking anything quite that cruel. But she *was* standing in her typical pose: arms folded, feet wide apart, chin in the air. If the girl was shaken up, she was doing her best not to let it show.

And here I was, freaking out for everyone to see. Talk about pathetic.

My hands finally stopped trembling. “All right. Let's get back to the questioning, shall we?”

Trying to ignore the smell of blood still hanging in the air, I forced myself to smile.

Chapter 10: The First Job Completed

Now then...time for a little interrogation.

Who should I try first, the man or the woman?

The bug-eyed lady was clearly terrified at this point. She was making muffled “Mmm!” sounds and trying desperately to squirm away from us. It was kind of titillating, to be honest... but let’s put that aside for now. If I took off her gag now, I had the feeling she’d start babbling a bunch of frantic nonsense. Seemed smarter to wait until she’d calmed down a little.

As for the lizard-man... I couldn’t really tell if his expression had changed much, what with the reptilian face and all. It did kind of look like he may have gone a little pale, but it also seemed like he was watchfully observing his surroundings. His eyes flitted from Eris’s face to Ruijerd’s, then to mine. I had the feeling his mind was completely focused on the question of how he could get out of this alive.

It really was a shame Ruijerd had killed their buddy. A short-tempered tough guy like that would’ve been the easiest nut to crack by far.

At this point, maybe we should just take off both their gags at once? We could take one of them into a different room, interrogate them separately, then compare their answers afterward.

Yeah, let’s give that a shot.

“Eris, stay here and keep watch on the woman for us, okay?”

“Got it,” Eris answered with an energetic nod.

I pulled the lizard-man to his feet and promptly marched him out of the room. Once we were far enough down the corridor that our voices wouldn’t carry back to his friend, I stopped and removed his gag, making sure not to give him any chance to bite me.

“I’ve got some questions I’d like you to answer.”

“Sure, sure! I-I’ll tell you whatever you want to know! Just don’t kill me!”

“Fair enough. As long as you talk, I’ll let you go.”

“Eek!”

I’d smiled brightly in an attempt to reassure him, but for some reason the lizard-man flinched back in fear. Maybe he wasn’t quite as cool-headed as I’d originally thought.

“Why do you have so many animals caged up in this building?”

“We...p-picked ’em up off the street.”

“Hmm! That’s really impressive! And where did you find them all exactly?”

“Uh, well, I mean...” The man’s eyes darted between Ruijerd’s face and mine. Was he really planning to continue lying at this point? “J-Just...around town...”

Okay, that barely even qualified as a lie. The guy had a clever-looking face, but maybe he wasn’t that bright after all.

“Wow, no kidding! There must be animals lying around for the taking all over the place, huh?” I paused for a moment, then fixed him with my fiercest glare. “Look, buddy. Do you think I’m stupid just because I’m a kid?”

“No, no! N-not at all!”

Yeah, that didn’t really work. With this body, any attempt at intimidation seemed to come out kind of ridiculous. I was only ten years old, after all. *Ah well. Guess I’ll have to scare him a bit.*

“Explosion.”

With a sharp snap of my fingers, I set off a small fiery blast right in front of the man’s face.

“Gaaah! Yowch!” It singed the tip of his nose nicely. “Wh-what the heck are you doing, man?!”

Naturally, I chose to ignore this question. “Do us both a favor and think a little harder about your answers. You don’t *want* to die, right?”

The lizard-man shuddered, presumably remembering the moment Ruijerd murdered his partner.

At this point, it finally occurred to me that our whole conversation back there had been in the Demon-God tongue. I had blathered on about Ruijerd and the Superd in a language these people could

obviously speak.

Ah well. If they know, they know. Might as well try and use that to our advantage.

“This is no joke. My friend here’s dying his hair blue, but he really is the one and only Dead End. And I’m not as young as I look either.”

“S-seriously...?”

“We’re the same type of people as you guys, all right? Just be honest with us. Maybe we can even help you out.” *Maybe not, but let’s see what happens.*

“B-but... Eeek!” The lizard-man glanced over at Ruijerd, only to look away immediately. He’d probably gotten a nasty glare.

“Come on, just spit it out already. *What were you doing here?*”

“We... We were catching people’s pets...”

“You don’t say. Why was that?”

“We’d wait until their owners filed a request...then bring the pets back and act like we’d just found ’em...”

“Hmm. I see.” It was probably the truth. I didn’t have any proof of that; it just made sense and seemed consistent with everything we’d seen.

The request that brought us here was filed by an innocent young girl, but you’d probably get the occasional wealthy lady desperate to find her little poopsie Christine. Although guild tasks seemed to pay out within a set range depending on their difficulty, maybe clients like that sometimes offered special bonuses on the side. With a bit of luck, you might be able to make a good living “finding” pets all day.

“What do you do if the owner never files a request though?”

“After a while, we just let the things go...”

“Hmm. Why not sell them to a pet shop for some extra profit?”

“Hah! That’d be a great way to get ourselves caught, kid.”

The instant the lizard-man snorted derisively at me, Ruijerd struck the floor with the butt-end of his spear. Our captive flinched back at the sound.

Beautiful, man! Seriously beautiful! Just when the guy starts to feel a little cocky, you remind him exactly where he stands here! You’re a born

interrogator!

“Sounds like you had this racket all worked out, huh?”

“Y-yeah, pretty much.”

“Personally, though, I still would’ve turned the extra animals into money. You could always chop them up and sell the meat to a butcher, right? No real risk of getting caught that way.” I mean, people seemed to enjoy eating monster flesh around here. They’d probably be just fine buying mystery meat from some miscellaneous animals.

Oh. Now the lizard-man’s looking at me like I’m some kind of serial killer. Come on! People eat Great Tortoises around here, don’t they? How’s a pet turtle any different?

I turned back to glance at Ruijerd, hoping for confirmation that I wasn’t crazy.

“Rudeus,” he said solemnly, “do you intend to dispose of these people in the same way?”

What an alarming question.

At least our captive’s reaction made sense now. He’d probably been wondering something similar himself.

“Hmm, now there’s an idea...” The lizard-man’s face twitched as I smiled ominously at him. Ah, now *this* expression I could recognize. It really brought me back. People used to look at me that way all the time in my first go-round.

“Rudeus...”

Ruijerd, please. You don’t have to glare holes in my back like that. I’m just kidding around, okay? I wouldn’t *actually* do that.

“Well, we only came out here to find a specific cat. It’s not like we’re a roaming band of vigilantes or anything. We could always walk away and pretend we didn’t see anything.”

“R-really?”

“Only problem is, you two know that Ruijerd here really is a Superd. Hmm. Now what are we going to do about that?”

“I-I won’t tell anyone! Hell, it’s not like anyone would even *believe* me if I told ’em Dead End was wandering around the city!”

“I don’t think that’s true. Ugly rumors always find a way to get

around.” It’s best to assume that anyway. Especially when it’s a rumor you don’t want spreading. “From my perspective, the single *easiest* thing would be to kill you all and bury your bodies somewhere, you know?”

“C-come on, man, don’t talk like that... I’ll do anything you want, okay? Just don’t kill me...”

Those were the words I’d been waiting to hear. Time to wrap up the intimidation phase.

Hmm. What am I going to do here though? These people were petnappers, which made them criminals, a.k.a. “bad guys.” But they were clearly small-time crooks with no connections to the local underworld. Letting them off the hook wouldn’t put us in any real danger.

That said, they’d seen Ruijerd kill a man, which meant they may eventually disrupt our plan to make him into a local hero. I’d really prefer not to have that risk hanging over our heads.

Murdering them in cold blood was off the table. I mean, I’d just given Ruijerd a lecture on this very topic. Maybe I could hand them over to the city watch or whatever?

No. All they’d really done was steal a bunch of pets, and that was hardly the gravest of crimes. The cops might let them off with a big fine or something, and they’d be right back out on the streets, possibly nursing a grudge. No matter how submissive they were being right now, once my foot was off their throat all bets were off.

Ideally, I wanted to keep them somewhere I could keep an eye on them...and periodically threaten them again. At least until I knew they weren’t going to cause us any problems. But that would carry certain risks as well. If we kept leaning on them, their resentment might fester into hatred. We’d already killed one of their friends after all. For now that was fueling their fear of us, but someday it might drive them to try and take revenge.

We couldn’t kill them...and we couldn’t hand them over to the cops.

How about taking them in then? That would keep them close at hand, and they could help us earn money and rise up the ranks. We’d make them gather information around town and run random errands for us. Hell, we could even take over their pet abduction racket.

Of course, Ruijerd probably wouldn't like this plan one bit. He'd already classified these people as villains, evil enough that they deserved to die. Somehow, I doubted he'd want to work with them.

Hmm. Let's run down the risk and return of all our options:

1. Murder them

RISK: Ruijerd will get seriously confused.

We might pick up a bad habit of killing our way out of trouble.

RETURN: Prevents any potential future problems.

We can take whatever cash they're carrying.

2. Hand them over to the city watch

RISK: They might hold a grudge.

RETURN: A bit of good PR, maybe?

3. Leave them be

RISK: They might hold a grudge.

RETURN: Nothing in particular.

4. Take them in

RISK: Won't go over well with my buddy.

People might think we're involved in some shady business.

RETURN: Easy way to keep an eye on them.

Provides us with some extra help.

Number one was easy to eliminate. It felt like we'd be heading down the wrong road. I wasn't a soft-hearted sap or anything, but murdering people left and right would just be foolish. I had the feeling it'd come back to bite us in the end.

Numbers two and three were low-risk, low-return plays. Even if our new friends did try to get revenge on us somehow, Ruijerd could track them down easily enough...but then we'd probably end up killing them anyway. That would be a lousy outcome *and* a waste of effort.

Number four seemed like the winner then. It might ruin Ruijerd's impression of me, but...putting everything else aside, we also had a pressing need for money at the moment.

Yeah, that's right. Money has to be our top priority right now, doesn't it? And some extra help should make that much easier.

Helping out with their pet-abduction racket was an option, but we could also add them to our party, then split up to tackle multiple F-rank jobs at once. That would move us up the ranks faster, and moving up the ranks was huge. Once we could take on rank C tasks, our lives would get so much easier.

...*Hm? Wait a second.* “Come to think of it, if you guys were taking lost-pet jobs, wouldn't that make you adventurers?”

“Y-yeah, that's right.”

Oh, hey! Us too! What a coincidence.

“What's your party rank?”

“Uh, D...”

Not only were they adventurers, they were a couple rungs up the ladder from us.

“So you're doing rank E tasks even though you're rank D?”

“Yeah. We could go up to C at this point, actually, but the lost-pet stuff was steady money, you know?”

Once you hit rank C, you weren't allowed to take on rank E tasks anymore. Maybe some people deliberately stayed put at D so they could keep working simpler and safer jobs...or so they could keep running a scam, in this specific case. If we were in their shoes, we'd jump up to C immediately and start grabbing B-ranked monster-slaying missions, but maybe some adventurers preferred avoiding combat altogether.

Hm. Maybe we could have these two take some C-rank jobs, then help them out with the fighting part? Even if we split the money evenly between us, that should solve our cash-flow crisis.

No, no...we'd never move up the ranks that way.

“Ah...” All of a sudden, a light bulb went off in my head. I'd just found the perfect solution.

“Hey, could you two keep doing this job without the guy who died?”

“N-nah, we'll just quit this racket and go legit...”

“Be honest, please.”

“Yeah, we could! That guy saw the two of us catching a pet and blackmailed us into giving him a cut!”

Whoa, seriously? Guess we got lucky...

It was a one in three chance, but Ruijerd apparently killed the right guy. Maybe the Man-God was watching out for us or something.

“Okay then. Why don’t you team up with us?”

“You want to join forces with them?!” Ruijerd shouted from behind me. “You can’t be serious!”

“Ruijerd, can you be quiet for a minute, please?”

“What?!”

“Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing here.”

I turned back for a moment. Unsurprisingly, Ruijerd was looking none too pleased. The idea sure *felt* like a good one, but maybe I needed to reconsider. It was just so...perfect though. We could earn money, increase our rank, and work on Ruijerd’s reputation, all at the same time.

Yeah. Unless I was overlooking something, there was nothing but upsides all around.

I turned back to the lizard-man and looked him in the eyes. “You said you’d do anything I want earlier, right?”

“S-sure. I can g-give you money, if you want. Just don’t kill us...”

“I don’t need your money. But I do want you to rank up at the guild.”

“Uh, what?”

Okay, let’s explain this nice and slowly.

“Look. Everyone in our party is a combat specialist, as you can probably tell. We can hunt down lost pets if we need to, but it’d be way more efficient for us to go out on monster-slaying jobs.”

“Yeah, I bet... S-so, er...why *are* you on a lost-pet job right now?”

“It’s a bit of a long story, but we only just became adventurers.”

“Uh, o-okay...”

It felt like we were starting to get a bit off-topic here. “Anyway! The point is, we want to take on combat jobs, but our rank’s too low.

You guys, on the other hand, aren't really capable of slaying monsters. You follow me so far?"

"Y-yeah..."

"Well, here's a nice, simple solution. We're going to start swapping jobs."

The lizard-man tilted his head to the side in puzzlement. "What do you mean?"

"You two are going to take on C- or B-rank monster-slaying missions at the guild. We're going to grab more lost-pet type jobs so we can get our rank up. We'll handle your jobs for you, and you'll handle our jobs for us."

"W-wait a second, what? The guild isn't gonna let you turn in our job for us..."

"Don't be stupid. The party that took the task will also be the one to report in once it's complete."

"Ah..."

I could see comprehension dawning in the lizard-man's eyes.

The concept was simple enough really:

DEAD END: Takes E-rank jobs; performs B-rank jobs

Reports in on E-rank jobs and receives the rewards

THEIR PARTY: Takes B-rank jobs; performs E-rank jobs

Reports in on B-rank jobs and receives the rewards

Afterward, of course, we'd meet up and swap the rewards we'd received.

There might be some issues with the concept in terms of the guild's regulations, but I'd heard high-ranking adventurers sometimes helped out low-ranking newbies with their tasks. We'd just be doing the opposite, more or less. It probably wasn't against the letter of the law.

"We want money and a higher rank. You people want to make a nice, steady living. Seems like we can help each other out, right? We'll even give you a cut of the B-rank rewards as your commission, if you want."

“A c-commission, huh...?” The lizard man swallowed audibly.

B-rank jobs paid out nicely. This was the carrot we’d dangle in front of them; we couldn’t rely entirely on the stick, or they’d betray us eventually. Our arrangement had to be a sweet deal for everyone involved.

“However, there is one condition.”

“Wh-what’s that?”

“You need to spread the word about Dead End all over town.”

“What...? Uh, I think everyone already knows the name...”

Sure seemed that way. “Yeah, but we want them to think he’s a nice guy. Tell everyone about our good deeds, even if you have to make stuff up. You can even call yourselves ‘Dead End’ while you’re dealing with random F-rank jobs.”

“Is there...some point to all this?”

There certainly was, but...if we gave this guy a long explanation of Ruijerd’s tragic past, was he even going to buy it?

No, probably not. He’d just witnessed Ruijerd kill a member of his party in cold blood. It didn’t sound like the two of them had been too friendly, but his impression of the Superd was probably set in stone at this point.

“There are some things you’re better off not knowing, friend.”

“F-fine... Fine, whatever.”

I ended up going with a half-assed non-answer, but the guy accepted it readily enough.

“Basically, you just want us to talk you up, right?”

“Exactly. Make sure you don’t use our name in a way we wouldn’t like, of course. Keep in mind, we’ve got a guy who could track you down to the ends of the earth.”

The lizard-man glanced fearfully over at Ruijerd and nodded several times.

“All right then,” I said. “Looking forward to working with you, friend...at least until we get our rank up.”

“R-right. Sure.”

“Let’s meet up tomorrow morning at the guild. Don’t be late.”

With a smile, I thumped the lizard-man on the back.

Just to be on the safe side, we questioned the woman as well to see if her story lined up with her friend's.

According to her, the two of them were lost-pet specialists before they became criminals. It had been their livelihood for some time. One day, they'd preemptively scooped up an animal that was clearly a lost pet, which got them thinking about how much easier their jobs would be if they could catch their targets *before* the requests were filed. Things escalated over time, and eventually they found themselves in the pet-capturing business.

At first, it had been a small-scale operation, but then Man A caught them red-handed in the middle of an abduction. He'd forced his way into the party as their "bodyguard," started acting like the leader, and quickly ramped up their activities. Apart from taking a huge cut of the profits for himself, he'd also coerced the woman into sleeping with him as part of his "fee." As a result, they weren't too upset with us for killing them. Especially the woman.

We really had gotten lucky.

Incidentally, the lizard-man's name was Jalil, and the bug-lady was Vizquel.

After a quick group meeting with both of them, I finally removed their handcuffs.

As we left the building with our client's cat, Ruijerd glared over at me and broke his silence. "Rudeus! What's the meaning of this?!"

"The meaning of...what, exactly?"

At this, he grabbed me by the lapels, lifting me a few inches off the ground. "Don't play dumb! Those people are villains! Do you really expect me to join forces with them?!"

Okay. The man was genuinely furious. His face was...scary to look at right now. I couldn't help remembering the fact that he'd casually killed a man only a little while ago.

“W-well, granted, they’re not great people. But they’re only small-time crooks...they weren’t doing anything *that* evil.”

“A villain is a villain! The scale of their evil is irrelevant!”

I’d known this was coming, hadn’t I? For some reason, my legs were still shaking. My voice was trembling, and there were small tears forming in the corner of my eyes.

“B-but look, this lets us kill two birds with one stone...”

“What does that matter?!”

Ruijerd *really* wasn’t buying this, was he? This wasn’t good. I was too afraid to think straight. The chattering of my teeth echoed loudly through my head.

“Villains will betray you in the end!” Ruijerd shouted, his eyes narrowing.

It was true. I’d taken that possibility into account. But this plan offered some juicy benefits from their perspective, and we’d just scared them pretty badly. It probably wasn’t going to be a problem in the short term.

“What were you thinking? Why must we conspire with such people?!”

Now that question...gave me pause.

The man had a point. It wasn’t like we *had* to join forces with those two. We could always have taken things at a more leisurely pace—taking on tasks from the guild when we could, hunting monsters outside the city when we needed cash, and slowly moving up the ranks. That was a perfectly viable alternative. And it wouldn’t involve relying on some shady people. It would be a bit of a detour, but that wasn’t the end of the world.

Maybe this *was* a bad idea. Should we call it off, turn around, and kill those two right now? Have ourselves a nice bloodbath?

Was I even in the right here? I wasn’t so sure anymore.

“Ruijerd!”

At this point, my inner debate was interrupted by a fierce shout. Ruijerd’s body swayed once, then twice.

“Get your hands off Rudeus!”

Eris was kicking him in the backside...repeatedly.

“What are you even complaining about anyway?!”

Her voice was loud enough to make my ears ring. A few passersby looked over in our direction, wondering what all the fuss was about.

“I dislike the idea of joining forces with a pair of villains.”

“Oh, boo-hoo! So what if you don’t like it? He’s doing this for *your* sake, stupid! And mine!”

Ruijerd’s eyes went wide, and my feet thumped back down onto the ground. Eris promptly stopped kicking him, but she wasn’t quite done with the shouting. “In the first place, what’s the big deal about them stealing a couple animals?!”

“You misunderstand me. The sort of people who would kick a *child* can’t be—“

“Oh, come on! I kick people all the time!”

“...Still, evil-doers can’t be trusted.”

“You did some evil things in the past yourself, didn’t you?!”

Well, now she had him at a loss for words.

Miss Eris... I’m very grateful that you’re sticking up for me here, but maybe we shouldn’t poke the guy too hard where it hurts...

“Rudeus is really smart, okay?! He’s gonna make everything work out fine! So just...shut up and do what he says!”

“...”

“Don’t start whining every time you feel a little bit unhappy!”

“But—”

“If you’re going to complain about every little thing, then just go home now! Rudeus and I can manage on our own!”

Ruijerd faltered, taken aback by the raw emotion on Eris’s face.

“...Very well. I’m sorry, Rudeus.” He apologized to me after a moment. The man had been overwhelmed by Eris’s vehemence. But that didn’t mean he was actually *convinced*, of course.

“Th-that’s all right, Ruijerd...”

The bar I needed to clear had just gotten much higher. After all that, I couldn’t very well admit that I was feeling uncertain myself.

Teaming up with those two may have been a careless move. But now that it had come to this, I had to stick to my guns, no matter how anxious I may feel.

I'd thought it was a brilliant idea at first. I'd just have to trust myself on that one.

...Not that there were many people I had *less* faith in.

When we reunited her with her cat, Meicel was absolutely overjoyed. She came running over the moment she laid eyes on us, threw her arms around Mii, and burst into tears of joy.

The girl obviously adored her pet. The cat was surprisingly tolerant of her affection...given that it was a panther.

"Thank you! Thank you! Uhm, here you go!" After a while, our happy client handed Ruijerd a small metallic card. There was something that looked like a job number on it, along with the word "Complete."

"What's this?" I said.

"You don't know?" the girl asked disbelievingly. "Aren't you adventurers?"

Well, I guess I'll let you tell me, if you insist! Harumph! "W-would you mind explaining, miss?"

"Okay! When you take this to the Adventurers' Guild, they'll give you money for it. It's not complete to start with though! But if you stick your finger on the blank part and go 'task complete,' that makes it all complete-y!"

A liberal translation: "If you place your finger on the card and speak the words *task complete*, the card will indicate that the job is done." Hmm. Was that a failsafe against the possibility of someone stealing the card? But what if I did the "task complete" part myself? Would that work? If so, you could just swipe the cards and turn them in for some easy cash...

Naaah. Even if it worked, the Guild would catch on in no time. And they probably had some measures set up to prevent that sort of thing.

“Uhm...it looks like this one already says ‘complete’ though.” Normally, you’d wait until the job was actually done to do that whole step, right?

“Yeah! I just knew Ruijerd was gonna find Mii, so I did it in advance!”

Oh my goodness. Too cute! A child’s trust is a beautiful thing!

Squatting down, Ruijerd patted the girl gently on the head. “I see... You had faith in me, did you? Thank you, Meicel.”

“Yeah! I didn’t know there were any *good* devils, but now I do!”

For a moment, Ruijerd’s face seemed to freeze in place. *I know how you feel, man, but that’s just where your reputation stands right now.*

“All right then, miss. Don’t forget about Dead End and your friend Ruijerd, okay?”

“Yeah! Come help me if she goes missing again!”

The girl’s final, cheerful words made my chest ache just a little.

By the time the three of us made it back to the Adventurers’ Guild, it was already twilight. If every job took us this long, we’d be bankrupt in no time.

“Hey, what the hell? They’re back!”

“Whoa! Did ya find that lost pet already, kiddo?!”

The moment we stepped into the building, that same Horseface guy started goading us again. He was easy enough to recognize, since his horse-head contrasted oddly with his minotaur-like body. Did he just hang around inside the guild all day or what?

“Oh, if it isn’t the horse-headed man from this morning... Did you take a break from work today?” It wasn’t too fun dealing with this guy honestly. He reminded me too much of someone who’d bullied me back in the day. They both made a big show of messing with you, basically inviting everyone else to join in.

“Uh...what? Yer talkin’ awfully polite all of a sudden, kid. Kinda creepy...”

Whoops! Forgot to put on my other personality. Guess I'll just roll with it...

"You're a veteran adventurer, and you were nice enough to give us some advice. Why wouldn't I speak to you respectfully?"

"O-oh. Sure. Guess ya got a point." Horseface actually got a bit bashful at that. What a pushover.

"Thanks to you pointing us in the right direction, our first job went off without a hitch."

"Say what?"

I flapped our task card in front of Horseface. The man seemed genuinely impressed.

"Well, ain't that something! It's damn tough to track down a single pet in a city this big, ya know?"

Yeah, I'm sure it would be ordinarily. All the more so when the pet in question was actually abducted. "Hey, no big deal when you've got Dead End Ruijerd on your side."

"Damn. For a total fraud, that guy ain't half-bad!"

"Shove it, Horseface! He's the real deal!"

Slipping into character for a moment, I stalked off toward the reception counters. There, I handed over the task card and our three adventurer cards to the clerk; after a while, she handed back our cards, along with a single rough, crude coin about the size of a 100-yen piece.

When I made my way back over to the others, I found Horseface and Ruijerd engaged in conversation.

"Hey, how'd ya find that thing, anyway? Just fer reference."

"The same way I track down prey on the hunt."

"Ooh. The hunt, huh? What's the name of yer people again?"

"...The Superd."

"Hah. Sure, sure. I know how it really is, man. That thing you're wearin' is a dead giveaway." Horseface was staring down at Roxy's pendant, now dangling prominently around Ruijerd's neck. "I'm Nokopara. Rank C."

"Ruijerd, Rank F."

"Yeah, I know what rank you are, man! Ah well. If there's

anything ya need to know, feel free to ask. I ain't stingy when it comes to helpin' out the newbies! Gahahah!"

Sounded like a good-natured chat, all things considered. It was kind of nice to see our party's designated outcast talking to a stranger, but I was also pretty worried he might say too much...or suddenly flip out and start attacking. Hopefully the topic of children wouldn't come up.

Eris, seated at Ruijerd's side, was a concern as well. I'd noticed people coming up to talk to her now and again, but since she couldn't speak the language, she never responded to them.

"Wow, that's a nice sword. Where'd you get it?"

"..."

"Hey! Come on! Don't just ignore me!" One female warrior in particular seemed to be getting irritated at the silent treatment.

"Can I help you, miss?"

I stepped in between them to intervene and she just grumbled, "Ah, forget it," and walked right off.

At this point, Nokopara turned his attention back to me. "Hey there, kiddo. Ya manage to get yer reward all right?"

"Yep. One scrap iron coin! This is the first money we've ever earned as a party."

"Haha! Man, they sure pay peanuts at first."

"Come on. That's no way to talk about a poor child's life savings."

"It's still peanuts, kid."

"Only in a monetary sense." That sweet little girl had saved up her allowance for the sake of her beloved kitty-cat. When you held that fact in your mind, even a single crude coin like this didn't seem so insignificant, right? "You obviously don't understand the *real* value of this reward. Why don't you get lost already, huh? Shoo, shoo."

"Man, talk about unfriendly. All right then. You keep at it, kiddo!" With a wave of his hand, Nokopara wandered off to a different part of the room. What the heck did that guy even do for a living, anyway?

In any case, we'd managed to bring our first job as adventurers to a successful conclusion.

Chapter 11: A Smooth Start

When we made our way to the front door of the Adventurers' Guild the next morning, a lizard-man immediately approached me.

"Oh, hello there. I already took care of ranking us up."

For a moment, I had no idea who this guy was supposed to be, but then I noticed the bug-eyed lady next to him and realized they were the petnappers from yesterday. Their names were...uh, Jalil? And Vizquel, I guess?

In my defense, it was tough to tell one face from another around here. There were a ton of lizard-people in this city, and it didn't help that these two were wearing leather armor instead of the civilian clothes they'd had on the day before. They seemed like totally different people when they dressed like commonplace adventurers instead of commonplace citizens.

"Good morning, Jalil. Thank you very much for dealing with that."

"Wh-what's with the polite tone? You're giving me the creeps..."

"I'm just speaking respectfully. Is that a problem?"

"N-no, no..."

When I glared at him, Jalil quickly averted his eyes. "Nice to see you as well, Vizquel. I'm looking forward to working with you."

"Uh...right." Vizquel was staring fearfully at Ruijerd. To be fair, Ruijerd was glaring daggers at the two of them. Oh well.

"Well then, shall we head inside?"

"Y-yeah. Sure," Jalil said with a nervous little nod.

The moment we stepped foot inside the guild itself, a certain horse-man spotted us and sauntered over. "Hey there!"

"...Hi."

This guy was hanging around in here *again*...? Seriously, how did he make any money?

“Oh hoh, what’s this? You’re with P Hunter today, huh?”

“H-hey there, Nokopara. Been a while.”

Apparently, Horseface and our new friend lizard-man were acquaintances. “Yeah, long time no see, Jalil. I heard about you guys rankin’ up to C! Sure that’s a good idea? Ya won’t be able to work those pet jobs anymore, ya know?”

Pausing for a moment, Nokopara looked from Jalil to me and back again, then nodded with a horse-like neigh.

“Nooow I get it. No wonder ya pulled off that lost-pet thing yesterday, kiddo! Musta convinced P Hunter to help you out, right?”

“P Hunter” was presumably the name of Jalil’s party. Sounded about right. “Yep, exactly!” I said. “We ran into them while we were looking for that pet yesterday, and they offered to show us the ropes!”

“Oh hoh. So timid little Jalil’s found himself some apprentices now? And one of ’em’s even a bogus Superd! Guhuhuh...”

Horseface was all too happy to buy my low-effort lie. He’d totally misunderstood the situation in a rather convenient way for us. After chortling to himself for a while, he leaned over to look around Jalil. “Hey, I don’t see Roman with ya today. Where’s he at?”

“Y-yeah...Roman, uh...died.”

“Ah, gotcha. That’s too bad.”

Roman was presumably the name of that man Ruijerd killed. Nokopara didn’t sound especially shaken up by the news. Maybe someone dying wasn’t even that big a deal in this line of work. Was I the only one who’d taken it that seriously? Jalil and Vizquel seemed relatively indifferent about the whole thing as well.

“Still, if ya lost Roman, why would ya wanna rank up now? That guy was the best fighter in yer party, wasn’t he?”

“W-well, I...” Jalil shot me a nervous glance. Seeing this, Nokopara let out another knowing neigh.

“Ah, yeah, I see how it is. Ya don’t have to answer that one. Course you’d wanna look like a bigshot in front’a yer new apprentices!”

It was almost impressive how neatly he’d wrapped things up for himself there. With a few friendly slaps on Jalil’s back, Nokopara finally turned and headed back toward the tables. I could hear the lizard-man

let out a small sigh of relief.

Seriously, though, what was that guy's deal? He was *constantly* harassing us. Did he have a crush on me or something? Nah...if anything, he seemed to spend more time looking at Ruijerd. Maybe he was partial to rugged, scar-faced men?

Somehow, I doubted it.

"Okay then. Why don't we take a look at the task board, everyone?"

As we strode further into the guild, a few people shot us peculiar looks. For now, we were better off pretending not to notice. Since the three of us were apparently "apprentices" now, I made a point of asking Jalil and Vizquel some questions as we looked over the jobs in the D- to B-rank range.

"Is there a difference between 'harvesting' and 'collection' tasks, guys?"

"Huh? U-uh, sure. They call it harvesting when you're gathering plants. The collection ones are mostly for stuff from monsters, I guess..."

Our new mentor's response was a bit on the vague side, but it seemed roughly accurate. Harvesting jobs mostly seemed to involve finding medicinal herbs and such...while collection was more of a catch-all for other types of "fetch quests."

"Oh, right. Ruijerd?"

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry, but I think we need to focus on earning money and building up our rank for a while."

"...Why are you apologizing to me?"

"Because we're putting that other matter on the back burner."

I did tell Jalil and Vizquel to spread the word about Dead End. I wasn't expecting much on that front though. I'd briefly considered micro-managing them to make sure they were helping people with a smile, but, fundamentally, it seemed smarter to stay hands-off. So long as we kept our distance from these two, we could cut them loose if it became necessary. Even if their criminal activities were exposed, and even if they tried to push the blame onto Dead End, they'd just get

laughed off—after all, they were much higher-ranked than we were, and everyone already knew Ruijerd was a ‘phony.’

“That’s all right, Rudeus. I understand.”

Since Ruijerd wasn’t raising any objections, I proceeded to pick out a few jobs in consultation with Jalil.

After exchanging a few words of greeting with the gate guards, the three of us headed out of town.

In the vicinity of Rikarisu, it seemed that Pax Coyotes, Acid Wolves, Great Tortoises, and Great Rock Turtles were your best bets when it came to hunting monsters. Pax Coyotes you mostly killed for their pelts; Acid Wolves for their fangs and tails; Great Tortoises were walking piles of meat; and you could find magic stones inside the Great Rock Turtles. We’d decided to ignore the Great Tortoises this time around, mainly because their meat was absurdly heavy.

Great Rock Turtles were top-priority targets. The magic stones you got from them were small but valuable, which allowed for some very efficient hunts. Only problem was, these were pretty rare monsters at this point, and you couldn’t find any too close to places where people lived.

I’d ended up taking a Pax Coyote pelt-collection job back at the guild. All things considered, they seemed like our best bet, since they came in decent-sized groups that let you earn a nice profit from a single battle.

Of course, that only made things somewhat more efficient, given that we had to track them down and skin them...so if we stumbled across any Acid Wolves out there, I was planning to hunt those as well. We hadn’t taken on any jobs to gather materials from them, but with collection quests, you could do the actual gathering part before you even accepted a job. Once you had enough raw materials, you could take on the task and bring them straight to the guild’s purchasing counter.

In any case...the Pax Coyotes were our main focus for now. You’d usually get about ten per group at most. Given the time it’d take to

track them down and skin them afterward, I'd initially assumed we wouldn't be able to kill *that* many in a single day.

After we hunted down and skinned our first group, though, Ruijerd began gathering their corpses in a pile. At first, I didn't understand what he was doing.

"Can you spread the scent around using wind magic, Rudeus?"

Ah. Now it all makes sense. We were going to use the smell of their blood to draw other monsters to this spot. I proceeded to billow the air in various directions, advertising our pile of fresh meat to the entire surrounding area.

"Giant stone turtles can't be lured this way, but we should attract every Pax Coyote in the vicinity at least."

It went off just as Ruijerd said it would. By the end of that day, we'd killed more than a hundred Pax Coyotes—enough that I wondered if we may have eradicated them completely from this area.

It had been a *very* hectic undertaking. Ruijerd and Eris slaughtered wave after wave of the monsters for hours on end. And I squatted behind them, working feverishly to skin the damn things.

It was grueling, repetitive labor. After pelt number thirty or so, my arms grew heavy, my shoulders started to ache, and the scent of blood became downright nauseating. Entertaining myself with fantasies of monsters that instantly transformed into gold once their HP hit zero, I managed to struggle on for some time, but I *had* to quit after roughly seventy pelts.

At this point, I swapped places with Eris.

Killing Pax Coyotes with magic proved much less agonizing than skinning them. I picked the things off one by one for a while, slowly adjusting the power of my spells to avoid blowing them apart or doing too much damage to their pelts. This was definitely more my kind of work. It actually involved some conscious thought for one thing.

But just as I was beginning to enjoy myself, Eris threw in the towel—having managed maybe thirty pelts. Evidently, she was even less cut out for manual labor than I was.

I assumed Ruijerd would take over the skinning now, but by this point we almost had too many pelts—the pile was getting unwieldy. We made the call to start carrying the things back to the city, a job that

would require multiple trips.

“Wait,” interjected Ruijerd. “Before that, we ought to burn the corpses.”

“You want to burn them? Not roast them or whatever?”

“Pax Coyote meat is truly foul. We’re just going to set fire to them and bury them.”

When you left a pile of corpses lying around, they’d serve as a food source for other monsters, encouraging them to multiply. Merely setting fire to them wasn’t enough to dissuade monsters from eating them; and if we just buried them, they’d apparently come back as “Zombie Coyotes.” Accordingly, you had to burn the things *and* bury them afterward.

A nice little plan instantly popped into my head:

1. Kill Pax Coyotes. Take pelts.
2. Bury the bodies as is, producing tons of Zombie Coyotes.
3. Wait for a Zombie-Coyote-slaying job to be posted at the guild.
4. Profit!

Unfortunately, Ruijerd shot down the suggestion. It seemed that deliberately allowing monsters to multiply was a major taboo in these parts.

Wish they’d write down these little local rules somewhere, man... “But we didn’t do this stuff for the monsters we killed on our trip over here, did we?”

“It’s not necessary when you’ve only slain a few.”

Seemed like an awfully vague rule. Still, a festering pile of bodies this massive seemed like it might be problematic from a public health perspective too. Since I couldn’t find any real grounds for an objection, I proceeded to burn the bodies to a crisp.

By the time we finished carrying our haul of pelts back to the city, the sun was setting. Our first hunt was finally over. It had been a *very* productive one. I was ready to go straight back to the inn and get some sleep.

Was I really going to be out there skinning dozens of those things again tomorrow, though? I sort of felt like we'd earned a day off...

"We really cashed in big today, huh? Let's do even better tomorrow!"

But in the face of Eris's enthusiasm, I couldn't bring myself to disagree.

A mere three days later, "Dead End" formally ascended to rank E.

"Nice work out there." With a few appreciative words, I handed Jalil a tenth of the cash we'd earned on the hunt that day.

"Th-thanks, man."

Ten percent was what we'd agreed on, but...it didn't seem like that much money. When I asked Jalil if they were really getting by on this, he explained that he wasn't just an adventurer by trade—he also operated a business in the city.

"What type of business?"

"Uh, a pet store."

Oh wow. So first you sell them, then you steal them? Kinda scuzzy, man.

"Don't do anything too evil, okay?"

"Yeah, I know."

The pet shop business was apparently a legitimate one anyway. They caught stray animals around the city, put them through a bit of training, then sold them off as pets. Jalil was a member of the Rugonian race, a people renowned for their beast-taming expertise. With the help of techniques passed down through the generations, he could supposedly "domesticate" anything from a stray mutt to a proud woman warrior of the Beastfolk.

Goodness gracious, what a wicked tribe.

It was a good thing Eris and Ruijerd were here with me, or I may have ended up groveling at his feet and asking for tips.

Leaving all that aside, this pet shop sounded like a profitable

operation—with an upside for the city as a whole, since he was taking potentially dangerous animals off the streets.

“So, uh. Why did you even start abducting pets if you already had a legitimate line of work?”

“At first, we were just taking in ones that got lost, but...I guess something got into us.”

Sure. It must have been pretty tempting once they got the idea in their heads. And once they gave in to that temptation, it was all downhill from there.

“Anyway, isn’t it tough to run a shop while also working as adventurers?”

“Nah, not really. We’re stocked with enough pets to last us a while.”

Apparently, they only kept the shop open until the early afternoon, then switched over to working on guild tasks for the rest of the day. “Well, I guess it’s no skin off my nose either way. So long as you keep getting the jobs done.”

“No worries on that front, chief—we’re adventurers in our own right. And we’re making sure to spread the word about Dead End too.”

Hmm. If you say so...

We’d made ourselves a bit of spending money at this point, so it seemed about time to buy new clothes and combat armor.

First of all, we picked out some clothing from a street vendor.

Eris didn’t take long at all to decide. She just wanted something sturdy but light-weight and easy to run in, criteria that led her to a less than stylish pair of pants.

It seemed like a sensible choice, especially given our current circumstances, but I felt like it wouldn’t hurt to have at least one “feminine” option as well. When I pointed Eris to a frilly pink one piece dress I’d spotted in a corner of the shop, though, she grimaced in disgust.

“...You seriously want me to wear something like this?”

“Can’t hurt to have at least one girly dress, right?”

“Oh yeah? Then how about you buy something *manly*, Rudeus?”

She pushed a fur vest at me. It looked like something a mountain bandit might wear.

Hmm. So if I put this thing on, Eris would wear a frilly dress?

It didn’t seem like a bad deal for a second, but then I pictured the two of us standing next to each other in our new outfits and immediately dropped the idea.

Once we were done buying clothes, we proceeded to a local armor shop.

Eris hadn’t yet suffered any serious wounds in combat, and I could use Healing magic to treat any minor injuries, so I’d been under the impression she didn’t really *need* armor. But as Ruijerd told me: “Your spells can’t heal fatal wounds or restore a missing limb, and Eris is still unaccustomed to battle. Complacency and carelessness can cost young warriors their lives.” It wasn’t a good idea for her to go without defensive gear.

The armor shop was a large and impressive establishment, although still somewhat cruder than the stores I’d seen back in Asura. The wares on display inside were universally more expensive than the stuff you could purchase from the city’s street vendors. The stalls and carts were your best bet for cheaper items, and sometimes you’d discover a hidden gem among the piles of junk, but shops like this offered reliable quality and a superior selection. They also had a wide range of sizes...which was pretty helpful, given that the two of us were children.

“Protecting your heart is really important, so I think we ought to buy the best one we can...”

At the moment, we were picking out a breastplate for Eris. There were a wide variety of these for female warriors in particular, designed to fit people with varying bust sizes.

“This looks fine to me,” said Eris, pulling on a beast-hide model that fit her perfectly. “What do you think, Rudeus?”

Naturally, I wasn't about to pass up a legitimate opportunity to stare at a girl's chest. *Hmm... Looks like things are coming along nicely.* "You should probably go with one that's one size larger."

"Why?"

Come on, think about it. "We're still growing kids. Anything that fits you perfectly right now will be too small in no time." I picked out a similar breastplate in a slightly larger size and handed it to Eris.

"It's all loose on me..."

"Nah, you're fine. Don't worry about it."

Muttering complaints, Eris proceeded to pick out other bits of armor for various parts of her body. All the fighting we'd been doing lately had given her a sense of where she was most vulnerable to injury. It wasn't hard to find gear to protect her joints and vital organs.

Her head posed more of a dilemma, though. An overly heavy helmet would only slow her down. Still, we didn't want to leave such an important part of her body totally undefended.

"How about something like this?" I said, presenting her with a full-face helmet that reminded me of one of the eviler Hokuto brothers.

"Not a chance," she said with a grimace.

Kids these days. No appreciation for the classics.

We went on try all sorts of different helmets, but Eris rejected every single one of them on the grounds of heaviness, ugliness, smelliness, or making it too hard to see. Ultimately, she settled on a headband of sorts; it had iron plates sewn into it to offer some protection.

Of course, the hood we'd purchased earlier was solely to hide her eye-catching red hair. It was meaningless from a defensive perspective.

"I guess that's all of it. What do you think, Rudeus? Do I look like an adventurer?!"

With the cutlass-like sword Rowin had given us fastened at her hip, Eris twirled to show off her new set of light armor. To be perfectly honest, it looked a bit like a cosplay...especially since that breastplate didn't quite fit.

"Splendid, miss. Simply splendid. You're the very picture of a seasoned warrior."

“You think? Hehehe...”

Eris put her hands on her hips and looked down at herself with a satisfied grin. As she savored the moment, I haggled down the cost of her equipment to one iron coin. Not a minor purchase by any means, but we *were* buying a full set of armor here.

“Okay, Rudeus! You’re up next!”

“I don’t think I really need anything, do I?”

“Of course you do! You’re a magician, so you should have a robe!”

I got the impression Eris had a certain fondness for stories where a heroic young warrior set off on an adventure with a magic-using childhood friend at their side. There were nights when the girl barely got any sleep, but she was certainly spunky during the daylight hours.

Ah well. Guess I’ll play along.

“Hey, mister. Do you have any robes that would fit me?”

The elderly owner of the armor shop walked over silently and opened up one of his wardrobes.

“Here. These were made for halflings.”

Inside, there was a wide variety of colored robes, all with slightly different designs. They seemed to come in five hues: red, yellow, blue, green, and grey. None were particularly vivid.

“Does the color make some sort of difference?”

“The colored ones have monster hair woven into the fabric. Gives you a bit of protection against a specific element.”

“Okay, so red would be fire, and yellow must be earth... Uh, what are the grey ones?”

“Just plain fabric.”

Ah. No wonder those are basically half-price. The cost of the other colors varied slightly as well. It probably had something to do with the materials they used to make them.

“So I guess you’d want a blue one, Rudeus!” said Eris.

“Hmm, I wonder...” In close-range combat, I’d been known to use explosive blasts to send myself flying through the air. Maybe red or green would be best? Hmm...stop or go?

“What type of spells do you know, boy?”

“I can use all the disciplines of attack magic.”

“Hmm. Well, ain’t that something. And here I thought you were just some kid... Okay. This one might cost you a bit more, but...”

After rooting through the robes for a moment, the old man pulled out one that was a notably darker shade of grey. “That’s genuine Mackey Rat hide right there.”

“M-Mackey...Mouse?”

“I said *rat*, kid. Not mouse.”

The image of a friendly fellow in bright red shorts floated briefly through my mind; I shook my head violently until it disappeared. The robe felt more like cloth than the hide of an animal, but that was probably just the nature of the material.

“So what advantages does this one offer?”

“It doesn’t offer any special protection against magic, but it’s tough as hell.”

I slipped it on, just to see how it felt.

“It’s a little baggy on me. Aren’t there any smaller ones?”

“That’s the smallest one I’ve got.”

“They must make some for kids, right?”

“Why would they?”

Now I knew how that little judo guy must have felt when he tried to put on a Normal Suit for the first time. Ah well. I was still a growing boy, so maybe this was all right. The thing did seem to be made of quality material at least... Judging from the feel, it’d probably provide some protection against stabbing weapons.

I somewhat liked that it was made from a grey-skinned rodent too. Fit nicely with my last name.

“Hmm, okay. Maybe I’ll go with this one.”

“You like that, huh? It’s eight scrap iron coins.”

“Well, let’s see...”

After haggling with the old man to the best of my ability, I ended up buying the robe for six scrap irons.

While we were at it, I also picked up two other headbands like

Eris's, but in different colors. These ones were for Ruijerd and myself. We could use one to hide that eye on his forehead if we ever felt the need to.

Why did *I* need one, you might ask?

Well...it's no fun being the odd man out, you know?

Incidentally, I'd asked Ruijerd to spy on Vizquel while Eris and I went out on our shopping trip. I wasn't expecting much out of her and Jalil, but depending on how they behaved, there was a possibility our reputation could be badly damaged. It seemed prudent to at least check in on them.

When I explained this to Ruijerd, however, he'd retorted that I never should have joined forces with them in the first place if I was that worried about their character. Definitely a fair point. But on the other hand, our arrangement with them *had* produced some major financial benefits. For the moment, a bit of paranoia felt like a small price to pay.

Long story short—our petnapper friends were performing their duties admirably. They approached even F-ranked jobs with a positive attitude and surprising diligence.

Today, Vizquel had worked an insect-extermination job. Her objective was to eradicate an infestation of loathsome critters that had occupied someone's kitchen. Vizquel happened to be a member of the Zumeba race whose saliva was poisonous, but also highly enticing to all sorts of bugs. Any insect that ingested it would either die or be rendered totally immobile, providing the Zumeba with a tasty snack.

In other words, Vizquel was born to do this type of work.

The client was an elderly woman—apparently a stubborn, cranky sort who never seemed to stop frowning. Ruijerd's impression was that she wouldn't hesitate to chase off anyone who displeased her in even the slightest of ways.

It didn't come to that, of course. Vizquel got to work at once and efficiently annihilated the insects; Ruijerd confirmed after the fact that there wasn't a single insect left alive in the old woman's house. Vizquel even stopped up a few gaps with some sort of thread-like substance, as

a preventative measure against invasion from the outside.

“Thank you, Vizquel. Those things were driving me crazy.”

“No problem. If you ever need anything, just remember the name Dead End Ruijerd, okay?”

“Dead End Ruijerd? Is that the name of your new party?”

“Yeah, more or less.”

After dutifully advertising our brand, Vizquel handed the old lady a few extra pieces of bait made from her saliva, then politely took her leave. With her job complete, she promptly met up with us at the guild to take care of the reward swapping.

“Sounds like she’s doing good work out there, huh?”

“...Yes.”

I certainly hadn’t expected that level of perfection. Not only was Vizquel already acquainted with the client, she’d gone above and beyond on the customer service. It probably left a *much* better impression than my ad-lib door-to-door salesman act would have. “Hmm. I guess they’re not rotten to the core after all, Ruijerd.”

“Perhaps not.”

To be fair, I’d been a bit suspicious of them as well, but I guess we weren’t asking *that* much. They were basically just doing ordinary jobs and mentioning “Dead End” at the very end. If we got them thinking that cooperating with us meant easy money for them, that was all for the best. It’d make them less likely to betray us too.

“However, the fact remains that they committed many evil deeds.”

“Yeah, you’re right. But right now, they’re out there putting in an honest day’s work...just like you, Ruijerd.”

“Mm...”

Being a “criminal” doesn’t mean you’re irredeemable; that applied to them as much as it did to Ruijerd and myself. It seemed like a good sign that they’d stopped abducting pets even though we hadn’t outright told them to.

That said, we were only three days into this partnership. The memory of their brush with death was still fresh in their minds. “Of course, they may only be playing along for the moment. We should

keep checking in on them like this whenever anything changes.”

Ruijerd furrowed his brow at that. “You joined forces with these people. Do you not...trust them at all?”

“Of course not. The only people I trust in this whole city are you and Eris, Ruijerd.”

“...I see.”

He started reaching out for my head, but stopped short.

I did trust Ruijerd, but it felt like I was starting to lose *his* trust.

I could live with that though. My goal was to make it back to the Kingdom of Asura with Eris. I'd do my best to improve the Superd race's reputation while I was at it, but earning Ruijerd's respect wasn't on my list of critical objectives.

“Well then, why don't we head back?”

We set off back toward our inn through streets lit only by illuminator stones.

All things considered, our adventuring career was off to a smooth start.

Chapter 12: Children and Warriors

Three weeks later, our party hit rank D. It felt like we were moving up pretty fast, so I finally got around to checking out the specific promotion criteria.

For an F-ranked adventurer to reach rank E, they needed to successfully complete ten F-rank jobs...or five E-rank jobs in a row.

For an E-ranked adventurer to reach rank D, it took fifty F-rank jobs, twenty-five E-rank jobs, or ten D-rank jobs in a row.

That general pattern stayed the same for the higher ranks, although the numbers started getting considerably bigger.

Demotion was also a possibility for those who messed up repeatedly. Failing five consecutive jobs with a rank lower than your own or ten consecutive jobs at your present rank would knock you down a peg. You couldn't be demoted by failing tasks at a higher rank than your own, but after five in a row you'd lose the privilege to accept them.

Jalil and Vizquel had been working diligently to knock out F- and E-rank jobs for us every single day, so we'd managed to get this far in no time at all. Now that we were D-ranked, we finally had access to more profitable C-rank tasks. Those were easy pickings for our party, so we'd probably pull ourselves up to rank C soon enough.

This might be the right time to cut off our arrangement with Jalil and Vizquel. They didn't seem to be abducting pets any more, but I wasn't entirely sure what problems the whole job-swapping thing might cause in the long run. We'd saved up a decent amount of cash at this point, so we had the option of saying our goodbyes to our "business partners" and leaving Rikaristu behind for good.

After a bit of thought, however, I decided to keep milking them until we made it up to rank C. There didn't seem to be any issues at the moment, and it was hard to turn my back on such a low-stress money-making system. It wouldn't hurt to have *more* money in our wallet before we left.

At present, our savings amounted to one green ore coin, six iron coins, fourteen scrap iron coins, and thirty-five stone coins...or 1,875 stone coins in total. So...1,875 yen basically. Our entire assets amounted to less than the value of two Asuran large copper coins...

Okay, cut it out. It doesn't matter what this would buy us on a different continent.

Once we hit rank C, we'd say goodbye to Jalil and Vizquel, then promptly leave this city. Seemed like a solid plan to me.

Not long after reaching this conclusion, I spotted an "interesting" task on the Guild board.

B

TASK: Locate and Defeat Unknown Monster(s)

REWARD: 5 scrap iron coins (2 iron coins if defeated)

DETAILS: Find and destroy a specific monster

LOCATION: Southern Wood (Petrified Forest)

DURATION: Before the end of the month

DEADLINE: ASAP

CLIENT: Belberro the Merchant

NOTES: A large, slithering creature was spotted deep inside the forest. Please identify it, and destroy it if it's dangerous.

Jalil and I pondered the piece of paper with our hands on our chins. *A mystery monster, huh? Talk about a vague job description.* There was a chance this thing wasn't even there. And even if it were, how exactly were we supposed to prove that it was one monster or another?

Still, two iron coins was a very tempting reward. Especially since we could still get five scrap irons if we chose not to fight the thing.

“You interested in this one?”

“Well, the pay’s really good. It does feel kind of fishy though.”

Jalil nodded in agreement. “Looks like the kind of job where you might get stiffed. I’d think twice if I were you.”

We’d already experienced something of the sort. Two weeks earlier, we’d accepted an ordinary-looking collection task for Acid Wolves. As usual, we’d hunted down the specified number of monsters and brought back their fangs and tails, only to be informed that the client wanted *complete* Acid Wolves—as in, their entire bodies. The description hadn’t clarified this at all, but we still ended up having to pay a breach-of-contract fee. Just thinking about it made me feel intensely frustrated.

It was probably smarter not to take this job if I wanted to avoid a repeat of that disaster...but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from that juicy “reward” line.

“Two iron coins, though... Hmm. Maybe I could use another learning experience...”

“Heh. Just don’t blame me if you get burned again.”

“For a task like this, the breach-of-contract penalty would be based on the five scrap iron coins, right?”

“Yep, that’s right. The extra money if you kill the thing is just a bonus basically.”

As Ruijerd tended to get harassed by Nokopara when he entered the Guild, and Eris sometimes had problems with random adventurers approaching her as well, I had the two of them waiting outside. Vizquel never showed up at the guild either.

In other words, there was no one here to stop me.

“Well, even if this mystery monster isn’t there, there’s plenty of stuff worth selling in the Petrified Forest. Knowing you three, I bet you could earn enough to cover the breach-of-contract fee. Guess it might be worth a shot.”

“All right then. Good luck with your jobs, too, Jalil.”

In retrospect, I’d realize just how lazy my thinking was at this point. A few weeks of battle experience had left me over-confident. Things had gone so smoothly that I’d underestimated the risks; my

impatience pushed me toward a big payday.

With the benefit of hindsight, there were better choices open to me. But at the time, I don't think I could have made them.

The Petrified Forest was a full day's journey from Rikarisu. It was a place where bone-like trees with jagged branches grew in enormous numbers, and derived its name from their stony appearance.

The forest stood alongside the main road in that region. Cutting through it offered travelers a shorter route to the next city, but since the wood was home to the dangerous B-rank monsters Executioners and Almond Anacondas, only merchants in a big hurry ever did so—and they always hired multiple skilled bodyguards beforehand.

Forests in this world were, without exception, dangerous places. But those found on the Demon Continent were particularly perilous.

Three parties had run into each other just outside this particular wood: the B-ranked party “Super Blazers”; the D-ranked party “Tokurabu Village Toughs”; and finally, the D-ranked party “Dead End.”

The leaders of these groups came together for a meeting. When adventurer parties bumped into each other in places like this, it was expected that they'd stop to have a quick discussion. It would've been nice to skip it, but running into the other groups in the forest itself might be a real nuisance. I'd decided to make an appearance.

“Okay. So what the hell are you kids doin' here?”

The first one to speak was Blaze, the leader of the Super Blazers. There was undisguised irritation in his voice.

The guy's face was familiar. He was the pig-man who'd laughed at us on our first day. I'm not trying to be insulting, by the way. He literally had the head of a pig.

Presumably, he belonged to the same race as that gate guard who'd leered at Eris. Couldn't quite remember what they were called... I usually just thought of them as “orcs,” to be honest.

In any case, pig-man's party was a group of six adventurers from a

wide variety of races. To be C-ranked or higher on the Demon Continent, you basically *needed* to be capable of taking down the more common monsters in your region; I had to assume they were all veterans who'd proven their skill in battle.

"We're here for a guild job!" said Kurt, leader of the Tokurabu Toughs, his face somewhat sullen.

"Same here," said the leader of Dead End (that being me) with a small nod.

Blaze reacted to the words of his D-ranked colleagues by clicking his tongue and scratching irritably at his neck. "Ugh. They booked us, huh? Yeah, I had a bad feelin' about this one..."

"Uhm...what does *booked* mean?" Kurt asked hesitantly.

"Shut it, kid!" This pig apparently had a short temper.

"Now, now," I said, sidling up to him with an obsequious smile. "Let's all take a few deep breaths, okay? We're sorry for being such clueless newbies, but we'd very much appreciate any explanation you could provide..."

Blaze spat on the ground, then grudgingly replied. "It means the same request got placed by more than one person. And the guild put both jobs up there without noticing."

Ah, right. A double-booking.

In this case, we had three separate clients who'd posted three separate tasks. The guild must have thought they were distinct jobs, but maybe that wasn't actually the case. It seemed like something that might happen every now and then.

Out of curiosity, I asked the others what their specific tasks were.

Blaze was here to "Slay the White-Fang Cobras that appeared in the Petrified Forest."

Kurt was tasked to "Collect the mysterious eggs spotted in the Petrified Forest."

And I, of course, was trying to "Locate an unknown monster."

"Huh? You're on a search and locate job? Do they even have those at rank D?"

Naturally, I'd worked out an answer to Kurt's question beforehand. "It's a C-ranked task, actually. They put it up there after

you left the guild.”

“No kidding? Man, I wish we’d gotten that one instead...”

As the kid muttered to himself, I took a moment to think about the situation we were in. It did feel like there was at least some *potential* overlap between all three of our tasks. First of all, White-Fang Cobras weren’t native to this forest; but judging from Blaze’s job, at least one had recently been spotted here. That could very well be our “unknown monster,” and it might also be responsible for the “mystery eggs” Kurt was after.

But of course, there was also a possibility that our mysteries were completely unrelated to the cobras. It was a little hasty to assume we’d been triple-booked.

“Still, I wonder how this happened?”

“How should I know, kid? It just works out that way sometimes.”

Hmm. Well, I guess it would. It’s not like the guild has all their tasks filed neatly in a computer or anything.

“All right then. What are we going to do about it?”

“Nothing. Whoever finds the monsters first wins.”

“What?!” shouted Kurt. “So what happens to our task if you get there first?”

“Huh? Oh, your eggs or whatever? I mean, we’ll smash ’em if we see ’em. Can’t have White-Fang Cobras hatchin’ all over the place, can we?” Blaze said with a smirk.

“Come on, Rudeus, say something! If they kill all the monsters, we’ll both fail our jobs!”

Kurt was turning to me for support. He did have a point. If Blaze’s party happened to kill our “unknown” monster, we wouldn’t get the chance to track it down or fight it...

Wait a second. We basically just need to locate and identify it, right?

I felt like reporting that the White-Fang Cobras *had* been here might be enough to satisfy our client. And to hedge our bets, we could always hunt down some random monsters here before we left. A big enough loot haul ought to cover the 20% breach-of-contract fee.

“Well, we don’t know for sure that this was a triple-booking. There might be something other than the White-Fang Cobras here as

well.”

Blaze grimaced. “So? You want to look around together, is that it? You expect us to be your babysitters?”

“Who the hell wants *your* help anyway?!” said Kurt, his face flushed with anger.

“Oh please. You’re obviously hopin’ we’ll protect you, right? This forest’s pretty damn tough for a bunch of D-rankers.”

Ah. Now I get why he’s so cranky. Blaze didn’t like the idea of a pair of low-ranked groups following his party around like a string of poop trailing after a goldfish. Perfectly understandable. It would only make their lives harder after all.

Of course, I didn’t want to travel with them, either. It wasn’t a good idea to let anyone see Ruijerd fighting with his spear. They might realize he really *was* a Superd when they saw how strong he was.

Fortunately, Kurt had already given me an easy out here.

“Okay, I’ve heard about enough of this. Dead End doesn’t need babysitters either, thank you very much. We’ll be working on our own.”

I promptly turned and left the leaders’ conference without waiting for a response to my declaration.

My party had been waiting for me a little distance away.

“So what’s going on?” asked Eris, her voice betraying some impatience.

“Looks like we’re all here to do the same job, more or less.”

“Oh. What happens now? Does somebody back down?”

“No, of course not. We’ll all go for it and see who finds the monsters first.”

“Oh yeah? Sounds like a decent challenge!”

Well, she certainly seemed enthusiastic at least. I felt like Eris had been getting sick of our hunting missions lately. Those jobs weren’t exactly *adventures* after all...more like manual labor. This probably seemed like a nice change of pace.

As the three of us were speaking, Blaze and Kurt brought the little leaders' meeting to a close. Kurt said a few words to his two companions, and they all set off into the forest together; the Super Blazers headed in as well, moving in a different direction.

"So what's the plan?" asked Eris.

"Hmm, let's see," I said. "Ruijerd can search the area for enemies, as always. We'll just move around and investigate until we single out this mystery monster."

It seemed like a simple enough proposal to me, but Ruijerd shook his head gravely. "Hold on, Rudeus."

"What's the matter?"

"I'm worried about those three children."

What children...? Oh, he means the Tokurabu Toughs.

"They're not strong enough to survive in this forest."

"So what you're saying is..."

"We should help them."

I really shouldn't have been surprised.

"Well, Ruijerd...if we stick too close to them, there's a chance they'll realize you really are a Superd."

"I don't care."

Yeah? Well, I do! "Okay, but it's going to cause us all kinds of problems if people realize who you are."

"What, then? Are you telling me to stand back and let them die?"

"That's not what I'm saying. Let's just follow them from a distance and help them out if they get in trouble."

I couldn't hope to talk him out of this one. We'd just have to adjust our objectives. Those two iron coins probably weren't going to happen, but we could earn ourselves some serious gratitude at least.

Still, was it really a good idea to thoughtlessly jump to the rescue here? If we had to protect those kids from a monster attack, the odds of them realizing Ruijerd's true identity got that much higher. I didn't *want* to believe that they'd cling to their prejudices about a man who'd just saved their lives, but Dead End had a special place in the minds of people on this continent. It was hard to know how things might play

out.

If worst came to worst, maybe we could intimidate them into joining up with us, like we did with Jalil and Vizquel...

For now, our party set off after Kurt and his friends.

As he watched the Tokurabu Village Toughs stride boldly along into the depths of the Petrified Forest, Ruijerd furrowed his brow.

“What’s the matter?” I said.

“Is this the first time they’ve set foot inside a forest?”

“Uh, I can’t say that I know... Why do you ask?”

“They’re being far too careless.”

Sure enough, Kurt and his friends soon found themselves face-to-face with an Executioner whose approach they evidently hadn’t noticed.

The Executioner was a type of humanoid monster—the zombified remains of someone who’d been an adventurer in life. For some reason, they were equipped with enormous swords and suits of thick plate armor. The sheer weight of their equipment meant they couldn’t move too quickly, but they were extremely sturdy, and wielded their weapon with surprising finesse. You usually only encountered one Executioner at a time, and they weren’t unusually large—and yet they were still B-rank monsters. That was proof enough of their sheer power.

Just to add insult to injury, their equipment dissolved into thin air when they died, so you couldn’t get much profit out of beating one.

“They need our help!”

“No, not yet,” I said, just as Ruijerd was tensing to leap forward.

“Why not?!”

“They’re not backed into a corner yet.”

That Executioner was swifter than you’d expect from its appearance, but it wasn’t fast enough to keep up with these kids when they were running for their lives. Little by little, they were gaining some distance from their pursuer.

But then, just as it seemed like they were going to give it the slip...their luck ran out.

A group of Almond Anacondas was waiting for them in the

direction they'd been fleeing.

These snake-monsters traveled in groups of three to five; they took their name from the distinctive almond-like pattern on their bodies, which were typically about three meters long. Their fangs were full of deadly venom, and they moved with great agility. Due to their toughness and their tendency to attack in numbers, they were *also* classified as B-rank monsters.

Kurt and company were trapped between the two best-known and most-feared inhabitants of the Petrified Forest. I could see their expressions wavering between smiles of disbelief and outright terror. They'd probably assumed that if they ran into either of these notoriously dangerous monsters, they could simply run away. And, to be fair, it almost worked with the Executioner.

In the end, however, they hadn't sufficiently considered what might go wrong. This place was just too dangerous for them; they really should have recognized that and steered clear of it. Not that I didn't sympathize with their eagerness to push themselves.

"We should go! Now!"

"No, wait just a little longer..."

Once again, I held Ruijerd back. We wanted to wait until they were *really* on the ropes. The worse things got before we showed up, the deeper their gratitude would be.

I'll let those things knock them around so I can heal them with my magic afterward. Heheheh. Perfect...

"Ah!" shouted Eris.

The bird-like boy flew through the air...in two separate pieces.

It had only taken one blow. He'd failed to sidestep the Executioner's attack, and the monster's sword had cut him clean in half.

My wicked smile froze on my face. I'd misread the situation completely. Those kids were in terrible danger from the very start. I was the one being thoughtless, not Ruijerd.

"I told you!" shouted Ruijerd, his voice full of frustration.

As he and Eris jumped forward out of cover, I quickly fired off a Stone Cannon at the Executioner.

My attack struck home with enough force to obliterate a Stone

Treant, but somehow, the thing stayed on its feet.

For a moment, I thought its armor was *unbelievably* strong. Then I noticed that its upper right arm was missing. I'd been so flustered that I misaimed my spell.

Picking up its enormous sword with its left hand, the thing immediately began running in my direction. From a distance, it had seemed fairly slow, but now that it was sprinting toward me I realized that it was abnormally quick given its clumsy appearance.

I stayed calm and created a patch of muddy bog directly in the Executioner's path. One of its legs plunged into my trap, sending it toppling forward. I promptly summoned up an enormous rock immediately above the monster and sent it slamming to the ground.

By this point, Ruijerd and Eris had already eliminated all of the Almond Anacondas.

In the aftermath of the battle, a trembling, pale-faced Kurt approached me to express his gratitude.

"*Huff, huff...* Th-thanks, man...*huff, huff...* seriously. Y-you guys are...really strong, huh...?"

The Executioner lay squashed under a giant boulder; the Almond Anacondas had all been neatly decapitated. No sweat, really. We'd win that fight every time.

And yet, we'd failed to protect these kids.

"That's okay... I'm sorry we didn't get here sooner."

Kurt was looking at me with something like admiration in his eyes. My chest aching with guilt, I looked away from his face.

My eyes found the body of the beaked, bird-like boy who'd been cut in half. What was his name again? Gablin? He wouldn't have died if I'd just kept things simple.

Ruijerd strode up and grabbed me by the front of my robe, his face twisted with anger. "That was *your* fault," he said, gesturing at the corpse with his chin.

The words stabbed ruthlessly at my heart. "Yeah. You're right..."

"We could have saved all three of them!"

Yes. I know. I know! I didn't want it to turn out this way either, okay? I was bursting with shame and misery. This wasn't what I wanted. Not

at all. I regretted my actions. I'd learned my lesson. So why did he have to keep rubbing my nose in it?

"Look, I'm trying my hardest, okay? I just wanted to get us the best possible outcome from that situation! Why do you have to be so tough on me?!"

"Because the boy died!"

Ruijerd's retort was simple, but painfully on-target.

"Gah..." There really wasn't anything I could say. I may as well have killed the kid myself.

Eris wasn't jumping to my defense this time, either. She was staring at Gablin's corpse...probably trying to process her own feelings about all this.

There were no excuses left to offer. I'd failed completely. People's lives were on the line, and I'd held us back too long out of sheer self-interest.

"H-hey, c'mon. Don't start fighting now." In the end, it was Kurt who stepped in to intercede.

"This doesn't concern you," snapped Ruijerd. "It's between me and him."

Somewhat surprisingly, the boy didn't back down in the face of this dismissal. "Yeah, but I can tell what happened. You guys saw us fighting and argued about whether to help us out, right?!"

Nope. It wasn't even an argument. I left you out to dry all by myself.

"I know you're all strong, but there was still a risk something could have gone wrong. And you didn't have any reason to help us anyway!"

The anger in Ruijerd's eyes blazed even hotter than before. "No *reason* was necessary! Adults have a duty to protect children!"

"We're not children!" Kurt fired back. "We're adventurers! Rudeus made the call any leader should have!"

"Hm..." Ruijerd fell silent for a moment, but I couldn't say I agreed with Kurt's assessment. "Still...one of your friends died, boy."

"Yeah, I know! I'm not blind! And the three of us wanted to stay together to the end! But you know what? We knew death was a possibility! Any adventurer's prepared to face that risk—*young or old!*"

My chest throbbed painfully at those words. Personally, I wasn't remotely prepared to stare death in the face. I'd seen the whole adventurer thing as nothing but an easy means of earning money.

"I'm grateful that you stepped in to save us, but it was our job to keep ourselves safe. If anyone's to blame, it's me! I'm the one who took this task and got us in over our heads!"

Kurt's argument had the stubborn righteousness of a kid who didn't really understand the way the world worked. But it was also earnest and heartfelt. This sort of passion was something I'd been lacking lately. In my obsession with earning money and climbing the Guild ranks, I'd started looking at our tasks as nothing more than "quests" in some video game.

"I'm sorry...Kurt, wasn't it? I was wrong to treat you as a child. It seems you are a warrior in your own right."

Apparently, something in the boy's tirade had struck home for Ruijerd; he lowered me to the ground with a brief apology.

Not that I deserved it this time. "Don't apologize, please. None of this changes the fact that I made an awful mistake."

"No, that was no mistake. You were only trying to respect their pride as warriors. I was overly eager to intervene."

"Uh..." *Nothing of the sort even crossed my mind actually. Sorry.*

"I was too hasty with those criminals as well. I'll have to be more careful in the future..."

Ruijerd seemed to have neatly wrapped things up for himself. But I didn't find his conclusions too convincing. I was going to give my mistakes today some serious thought later. I needed to identify exactly where I'd gone wrong, and make sure this never happened again.

Still, there was definitely a part of me that was thinking, *Nice! Good thing he got the wrong idea! At least I got away with it.*

I wanted to smack myself in the face.

Kurt and his friend told us they planned to carry their fallen comrade back to town. We escorted them back as far as the entrance to

the forest. I'd expected Ruijerd to insist we guard them all the way to Rikarisu, but he shook his head at the suggestion. He'd recognized Kurt and his friends as warriors. That changed things.

"They may not make it back safely with their party reduced in size. But they have resolved themselves to face that risk."

Kurt had said as much, yes. But there was something deeply melancholic about his posture as he walked away from us. It was so obvious that Eris impulsively ran up to him and said, "Good luck out there!"

She didn't speak his language, of course, but Kurt clearly sensed the meaning of her words from the expression on her face. "Thank you," he said. "Uhm...is this how you do it?"

"Huh?!"

The boy took Eris's hand, leaned forward, and kissed it near the knuckle of her thumb. With one last, bright smile, he turned and walked off once again.

Eris had frozen up completely. I wasn't sure what to do, either.

Suddenly, she spun around to look at me, then began vigorously rubbing the top of her hand against the edge of her armor. "No, no! You've got it all wrong!"

Was that actual *panic* on her face? I mean, the kid did kiss her, but she had gloves on. It didn't seem like anything to get that worked up about.

"I... I won't even use this anymore!"

Eris ripped off her glove and tossed it into the forest. What a waste of perfectly good leather. Ruijerd and I scolded her simultaneously: "Don't throw away your equipment!" "Those things cost money, you know!"

I really wished my mind hadn't gone straight to the "money" thing again.

"Oh, shut up!" shouted Eris, stomping her feet against the ground with tears in her eyes.

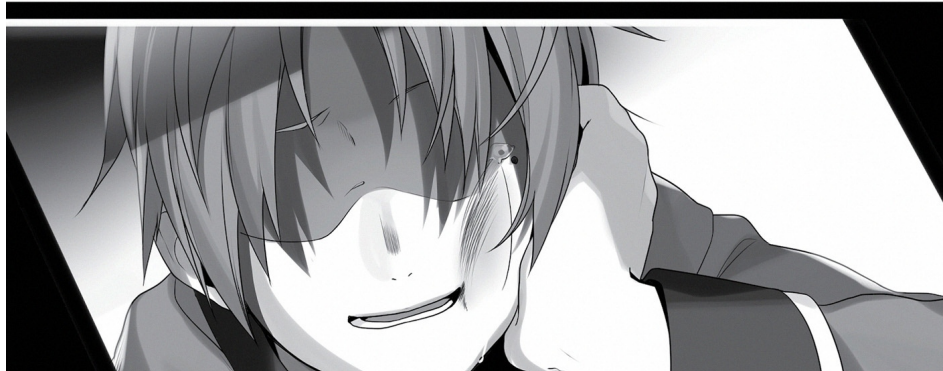
This was the first time in a while I'd seen her like this. Was I missing something? Did a kiss on the hand mean something specific around here or what?

“Rudeus! Here!”

At this point, she pushed her hand in front of my face. I licked it reflexively.

Eris’s face went red at once. Approximately one half-second later, she punched me.

This was a *real* punch, too. I barely stayed conscious, and for a moment, I thought she’d snapped my neck. This girl just might be a world champ someday. I collapsed backward in a clumsy heap.



Hmm. Wonder what was I supposed to do there...?

As I looked up at her from the ground, Eris stared at the spot where I'd licked her, then briefly touched it with her tongue as well.

Instantly flushing bright red, she then scrubbed her hand forcefully against her clothes.

"S-sorry about that, Rudeus. But you can't lick me, all right?!"

It was all pretty adorable, so I forgave her on the spot.

This hadn't been a good day overall, but I wasn't feeling *quite* as miserable anymore.

As we made our way deeper into the forest, I found myself thinking about Ruijerd.

He was a man with an absolute moral code, and he loved "children". Those were the fundamental facts I was working with till this moment; but that conversation earlier suggested that "warrior" was also something of a keyword for him.

"Ruijerd, what's your definition of a warrior?" I asked.

His response was instant. "Warriors are those who protect children and fight for the sake of their comrades."

That explained so much actually. His outbursts of anger made more sense now. Ruijerd wasn't lashing out at random; he just expected "warriors" to conduct themselves with dignity.

His most basic set of rules seemed to be something along these lines:

A warrior must never harm a child.

A warrior is obligated to protect children.

A warrior must never forsake a comrade.

A warrior is obligated to protect his comrades.

Based on these, he'd positively identified that petnapper as a "villain" rather than a "warrior" the moment he kicked me. And when the other two pleaded for their lives instead of seeking to avenge their fallen comrade, he'd contemptuously placed them in the "villain" category as well.

The thing with Kurt was somewhat similar. At first, he'd viewed those three as children. So when I sat back and allowed one of them to die, that made me a villain in his eyes. But then that sharp exchange of words with Kurt changed his perspective. He'd reclassified those three as "warriors" rather than children. That made my actions easy to forgive; if anything, he seemed more upset at himself for having failed to categorize them correctly from the start.

It was a little hard to tell exactly where he drew the line between "children" and "warriors", though. I got the sense he still considered Eris to be a child, but I wasn't sure where he placed me these days.

Should I ask him? Or would that be a mistake?

"There's a battle taking place up ahead," Ruijerd announced, interrupting my internal debate.

"Oh. Is it that other party? The Super Blazers?"

"That's right."

Apparently that pig-man had found himself some trouble. I wasn't sure exactly what sort of sight Ruijerd's third eye offered him, but he could apparently use it from underneath a headband—and well enough to pick out one adventurer from another.

Talk about convenient. I want one too.

"You think we should help them?" I asked.

"That's not necessary," he replied.

Hmm. Well, they're B-ranked adventurers after all. I guess he'd classify them as warriors from the start...

We moved a bit deeper into the forest and came upon a single enormous snake coiled in a clearing. Four corpses lay scattered around it.

"...Huh?" *Uhm, these gentlemen appear to be dead... So that's what he meant by "not necessary," huh?*

I didn't see Blaze's body among them though. Had he managed to

escape?

“It was a party of six, right? Where’d the other two go?”

“They’re dead.”

A total wipe? Damn. Rest in pieces.

“Okay, so what *is* that thing?” The snake that had killed Blaze and company was...very, *very* large.

“A Red-Hood Cobra.”

Its body was so thick that Eris and I couldn’t have wrapped our arms around it fingertip to fingertip. It had to be ten meters long. And its “neck” area was flatter and wider than the rest of its body. I could see two distinct bulges halfway down the monster’s trunk. One of those was presumably a great big lump of pork.

Weren’t we looking for *white* cobras, though?

“I wouldn’t have expected to find one in this forest,” continued Ruijerd. “Let alone such a huge specimen.”

“They don’t usually live here then?”

“No. But one does spawn every once in a while.”

Red-Hoods were apparently a more powerful variant of White-Fang Cobra. Not only were they larger in size, they were also far more agile. Their scales were tough and resistant to fire magic; their fangs were enormous and full of deadly venom. It wasn’t clear what a White-Fang had to eat to mutate into one of these, but on occasion, you’d find one where they lived.

White-Fang Cobras were B-ranked monsters, but the Red-Hood Cobra was an A-rank—and for good reason. They could wipe out a typical B-ranked party in mere seconds.

At the moment, this one was occupied with his current meal, and didn’t seem to have noticed us. It was just getting started on its third adventurer of the day.

“We can take this thing, right?” said Eris, confidently unsheathing her sword.

“Shall we attack it?” Ruijerd asked me.

“...Is it okay for me to make the call?”

“Who else would?”

“I leave it in your hands.”

Apparently it was up to me. I took a moment to think it through.

Our task today was to discover, identify, and possibly defeat the “unknown monster” lurking in this forest.

First of all, it seemed obvious that the monster in question was either this Red-Hood Cobra, or the White-Fangs that were also spotted here. Neither was native to this forest. We’d probably get credit for completing the job if we headed back now and reported what we’d seen.

However, if we killed it our reward would increase to two iron coins. It’d be nice to beat the thing if we could. But keeping ourselves *alive* was also kind of important. I’d just seen someone die right before my eyes. Failure would mean death; I didn’t want to put us in unnecessary danger.

As I hesitated with my decision, Ruijerd broke the silence. “I could defeat it by myself, if you prefer.”

“Could you really kill that thing on your own, Ruijerd?”

“Yes. I’m more than enough for this job.”

Wow. Talk about a reassuring line. I’m sure the King of Fighters reference was unintentional.

“Can you take it on while also protecting Eris?”

“Not a problem. We’ll fight the same way we always do.”

Ruijerd didn’t seem remotely intimidated, even in the face of an A-ranked enemy. Based on that alone, I felt like we’d probably be all right.

“Let’s do it then.”

I would attack with magic from a distance while Eris and Ruijerd fought the monster at close range, same as always. So I started things off the way I always did—with a Stone Cannon.

We were up against an A-ranked enemy this time, so I tweaked the spell slightly to increase its power. The projectile I created was a

hollow, wedge-shaped rock, filled with concentrated fire magic that would cause it to explode on impact. I fired it off at supersonic speed, expecting to see it slam into the snake's side with an ear-splitting boom.

“Wha—”

But to my surprise, the Red-Hood Cobra twisted itself around and evaded my bullet.

This wasn't just a coincidence. That thing had *dodged* the spell. It had spotted the projectile in the air and reacted quickly enough to evade it. The stone exploded harmlessly somewhere off in the distance.

“You've got to be kidding me...”

Our preemptive attack had been a failure, but our special attack squad wasn't about to stop. Ruijerd charged forward in the lead, with Eris trailing off to the side. This wasn't our usual formation; up until now, Eris had mostly been the one out in front.

“Hissss!”

“...Hmph!” Ruijerd led off with a typical thrust, stabbing at the snake's head with his trident. The Red-Hood Cobra swayed to avoid the attack, then tried biting him on the rebound. Its fangs were big enough to punch a gaping hole right through a man, but Ruijerd deflected them with a casual swipe of his spear.

In the meantime, Eris had circled around to the rear of the cobra. She took a big swing at its tail with her sword. The blow struck home, but didn't cut all the way through the snake. Its scales, or perhaps its muscles, were clearly tough.

“Hisssss!” Just as the Red-Hood's attention turned to Eris, both she and Ruijerd jumped back to a safer distance. Without missing a beat, I fired off another spell at it. We'd worked out this sequence beforehand. It was pretty typical of our combat style as a party.

“What, again?!”

Unfortunately, the Red-Hood Cobra dodged my spell a second time. I'd sharpened the tip of my stone projectile to increase its speed, but to no avail; the bullet soared past the snake's flank and into the forest, knocking down a few trees as it went. Once again, the monster had reacted *after* spotting the projectile in mid-air.

It wasn't the end of the world though. I didn't really need to hit it.

Our frontliners attacked in waves. Ruijerd persistently targeted its brain and vital organs; Eris darted in to chop at its tail, keeping the thing distracted. And every now and then, I fired off a potentially deadly spell.

The pattern was a simple one, but it wasn't easy to deal with. If the monster had focused its attacks on Eris, it could have potentially broken through our lines. But Ruijerd was so masterful at drawing "aggro" that the Red-Hood Cobra was forced to ignore both her and myself.

Ruijerd and I weren't landing any hits, but over time, the snake grew fatigued. Its movements began slowing.

And in the end, one of my Stone Cannon spells finally struck home.

By the time we finished processing the Red-Hood Cobra's body, the sun had already set. We were having a snake-meat feast for dinner tonight, naturally.

I didn't know which specific parts of this thing were valuable, so we just ripped out its fangs, then stripped off its skin and rolled it up like a carpet. We'd found the eggs that Kurt's party had been looking for nearby, but they were so large it seemed impossible to carry them. I thought over our options for a while before deciding to smash the things. Deliberately allowing monsters to spawn was a no-no around here after all.

As for Blaze and company...we relieved them of anything that looked valuable, then burned and buried their bodies. If we'd just left them lying there, would they have turned into Executioners eventually? I didn't entirely understand this whole "reviving as a zombie" phenomenon to be honest.

Gotta say, though, that red snake was really something...

I found myself thinking back on the battle we'd just fought—specifically, about the way that cobra had avoided my magic.

It had dodged my spells. Numerous times in fact. Until that direct hit at the very end, I never really even grazed the thing.

Come to think of it, the Executioner earlier today had probably done something similar. I'd targeted my first spell at its chest, but it only lost part of one arm. Maybe I needed to assume that monsters ranked B or higher were capable of avoiding magic.

That red snake was ranked A of course. It had actually avoided Ruijerd's spear thrusts too...but that was probably because he was holding back. If he really wanted to, I was sure he could have killed it instantly.

Interesting that it never dodged Eris's sword though. Maybe it felt that wasn't necessary, given how much less dangerous she was.

In any case...this world really was chock-full of terrifying threats. Even some humans could supposedly ward off magical attacks, and now I'd run into monsters that could dodge a mid-air bullet. At this rate, I had to assume S-ranked monsters may be capable of shrugging off a Stone Cannon strike without a scratch.

Now there's a scary thought... I've gotta make a mental note to keep my distance from dangerous places.

One way or another, we'd managed to complete our task.

As it turned out, it would be the last one we ever finished in the city of Rikarisu.

Chapter 13: Failure, Chaos, and Resolve

Having slain the Red-Hood Cobra, our party headed back to the Adventurers' Guild. As always, we met up with Jalil outside the building itself to exchange our task cards. We also handed over the snake's fangs and skin, and worked out our stories to make sure they stayed consistent.

There was a large amount of stuff to carry this time, so for once we all headed over into the guild, even Vizquel. The moment we set foot inside, Nokopara came sidling up to us. It seriously felt like the guy never left this place...or left us alone.

"Hey there! Looks like you've been huntin' some real interestin' prey. Are those Red-Hood Cobra scales I see? Well?"

I glanced over at Jalil, prompting him to trot out the story we'd worked out in advance.

"Y-yeah, that's right. We got lucky and ran into the thing when it was already real weak."

"Hmmm. You two took down a Red-Hood, huh...?"

Nokopara stared down Jalil with something that looked like a condescending smirk on his horsey face.

What's going on here? He seems kinda different today...

"W-we found the bodies of the Super Blazers guys before we ran into it actually. They must have softened it up before they died..."

"What? Hold on, you sayin' Blaze is dead?"

"Yeah."

"Damn. Guess that's how it goes when you run into a Red-Hood though..." Nokopara said with a disinterested snort. "Still...even if it was weakened up, it's hard to imagine you an' Vizquel takin' one of those monsters down..."

"Well, it wasn't just *weakened*, really. It was almost dead. I mean, you could almost say it *was* dead. It was still breathing, yeah, but it was

basically a goner, you know?” Jalil, speaking a bit too rapidly now, chose this moment to walk hurriedly away.

Nokopara didn't seem to be satisfied yet, though, and turned his attention to us. “So! You guys find some lost pet again today or what?”

“Yeah. Master Jalil's taught us some excellent techniques. We managed to earn ourselves a bit more pocket money today.”

“Hmmm...”

Something felt a little off about this conversation. I tried to slip away and walk off quickly like Jalil had, but just as I began moving, Nokopara slung his arm around my shoulders in a weirdly intimate way, and leaned over to whisper in my ear. “So tell me, how exactly were ya huntin' down pets *outside* the city?”

For just an instant, I stopped moving. But I think I managed to keep my poker face on. This was a situation I'd planned for. He'd only seen us heading out of Rikarisu. I could talk my way around that.

“It just happened to wander outside of town this time.”

“Oh reaaaally? So what then...” This time, Nokopara grabbed Jalil firmly by the shoulders. “Did that Red-Hood Cobra just happen to be *inside* the city, too?”

Okay. So he'd seen Jalil and Vizquel around town as well. In other words, the jig was up.

“Hmm. Verry strange. Lots of odd things happening these days.”

I'd given some thought to this scenario. We did have some options to deal with it. For example, I could blame everything on Jalil. If I insisted he was forcing us to do dangerous, high-rank work against our will, I could wriggle my way out of the immediate crisis.

I wasn't going to go down that route though. If I did, Ruijerd might cut off ties with me for good. It was conduct unbefitting of a warrior after all.

“Come on, guys. Just 'fess up already, why don'tcha?”

“To what exactly?” I asked. “Have we done something wrong?”

“Huh?”

“We helped out with P Hunter's job, and P Hunter helped out with ours. Is that such a big deal?” Instead of sticking to lies and cover stories, I chose to give the “So what?” approach a try. I'd looked over

the guild regulations a second time a while ago, and there definitely wasn't any clear rule against what we were doing.

Of course, that didn't mean people would be okay with it. You don't get to do anything you want just because it's not *technically* illegal. But I wasn't sure if we'd crossed the line into unacceptable behavior either. May as well try insisting that we'd done nothing wrong.

"Are you friggin' serious, kid? Ya ever thought about what happens if a buncha other idiots start pullin' that crap too?"

"Not really. What *would* happen?"

"Jobs would start gettin' sold to the highest bidder. The whole damn point of the guild would disappear!"

Hm. I could insist we weren't paying each other for our tasks...but that probably wouldn't fly, would it? *Right... I guess you could technically classify this as a form of "buying or selling guild tasks." This guy's smarter than he looks.*

To be sure, if our methods became more common, you'd probably start seeing some people selling off their jobs for an easy profit. For example, someone could just accept *all* the D-ranked jobs available at once, then sell them off piecemeal to the other D-ranked guys. The seller would get a steady flow of cash, and eventually move up the ranks—all without lifting a finger himself.

Of course, with that approach, you'd end up failing any jobs you couldn't manage to sell.

"Why do you even care, Nokopara? We're not causing you any trouble, are we?"

"Ya sure you wanna take that tone with me, kid? Yer standin' at a bit of a crossroads right now, see... You listen up, too, Jalil!"

At this point, Nokopara seized me by the front of my robe and lifted me up off the floor.

Glancing behind me, I shook my head at Eris and Ruijerd, whose eyes were flashing with anger. Right now, I needed them to *stay*; this conversation wasn't over yet.

"Hehehe..." It was hard to interpret Nokopara's expression, what with the whole horse-head thing. But I got the definite impression that he was leering at me. "If ya care about yer status as an adventurer, ya best start bringin' me two iron coins per month."

Oh wow. This is almost refreshing actually. I felt like this was the first time I'd met one of these types since I was reincarnated in this world. Everyone I'd run into lately was more of a shades-of-grey character, you know? It was kinda nice to get such a clear-cut bad guy for once. At least I wouldn't have to overthink the situation.

In any case, now I knew why Nokopara hung around the guild all day. He obviously kept a sharp eye out for adventurers who were up to no good—so he could squeeze cash out of them. Seemed like a nice, easy line of work.

Couldn't I just report him for blackmail or something? No...that would mean exposing my own actions as well...

"You guys are makin' good money these days, right? Heheh. Oughta be no sweat."

"D-do you mind if I...ask a few questions?" I said, doing my best to sound hopelessly flustered.

"Like what?"

"Uhm... I guess what we did...*would* probably be classified as selling a job, right?"

"Yeah, fer sure. They'd slap ya with a nice fat fee and rip up yer card if they ever found out. Wouldn't like that, would ya?"

"No! No. We...don't want that."

Stay calm. This isn't anything worth panicking over. I knew something like this might happen. We're okay. We're still okay.

"U-uhm, okay, we don't have that kind of cash on hand right now, so...can Jalil and I go turn in our jobs?"

"Sure, whatever. Just don't make a run for it, all right?"

"W-wouldn't dream of it, chief!"

This guy wasn't *that* smart after all apparently. The two of us broke away and headed for the counter.

"H-hey...what do we do? What are we gonna do, man?!"

"Calm down, Jalil. You need to act like nothing's wrong."

Having offered Jalil those vague instructions, I signaled Vizquel to come over and join us. We passed over our completed task cards and received our rewards. But before we left the counter, I also had them

dissolve P Hunters and join Dead End.

This step may or may not be meaningful. I wasn't sure how detailed the Guild's records were.

I looked back across the room and saw Ruijerd glaring at Nokopara with murder in his eyes. While we may have broken the guild's rules, it seemed Horseface's arrogant attempt at blackmail was a far graver violation of the warrior's code.

With a small gesture, I signaled Ruijerd to restrain himself.

Eris didn't seem to understand what was going on. If she spoke the Demon-God tongue, she'd probably have been the first to attack that obnoxious horse...and she'd probably have used her sword, not her fists.

As Jalil and I rejoined the group, Nokopara slung his arms around our shoulders like we were old friends or something. "All right then! Cough up yer payment for this month, boys."

With a forced smile on his face, Jalil started to hand over the two iron coins he'd just received, but I grabbed his hand to stop him.

"Just one thing before we do that."

"What? Make it quick, kid. I got a real short fuse."

I paused for just an instant to steady my nerves and say a silent little prayer.

"You *do* have some sort of proof that we broke the rules, right?"

Nokopara's irritated "Tch!" echoed across the lobby.

Nokopara started off by pulling a list of tasks that Dead End had completed from the Guild's record books. The clerk didn't ask him why he wanted this information; this probably wasn't the first time he'd asked for it. Apparently, we'd be using this information to pay a few visits to our previous clients.

"Oh, and don't get any funny ideas about attackin' me in some back alley," said Nokopara, his eyes moving from Ruijerd to Jalil.

I felt like the rage on Ruijerd's face was pretty obvious, but

Horseface didn't seem too intimidated. Maybe he was used to getting glared at by men who wanted him dead. "If I die, my pals will go straight to the guild to report ya. Oh, an' unlike you phony C-rankers, I'm the real deal. I could hit B-rank anytime I felt like it."

You had to assume that last part was just a bluff. Even Nokopara surely didn't believe that he could take us one on five. He was driving us into a corner, yes, but that didn't mean he had a death wish.

Still, this seemed somewhat careless of him. I would've taken at least one bodyguard along if I were in his shoes.

"Oookay then, here we are." The first place we arrived at was an ordinary but unfamiliar house.

When Nokopara knocked on the front door, a cranky-looking old lady emerged. She had an eagle-like beak on her face and wore a plain black robe.

A sugary-sweet smell wafted from inside the house itself. No doubt we'd interrupted her in the middle of whipping up some Nerunerunerune...

The old lady glared at us suspiciously at first, but once she noticed Vizquel, her face lit up.

"Well now! If isn't Vizquel! What's all this, dear? You've brought me quite a crowd today. Oh, are these the other members of Dead End Ruijerd?"

Nokopara surveyed our startled faces, then looked back at the old lady, who clearly only recognized Vizquel. He let out an amused grunt, a nasty smile spreading across his face. "Sorry, lady, but they ain't Dead End. Ya got scammed."

"What?" Glancing at Nokopara, the old lady snorted disdainfully. "How exactly did I get *scammed*? Huh?"

"Well, they—"

"Vizquel cleared out those bugs just fine. Can't beat a Zumeba for this sort of thing, can you? I haven't seen a single one since."

From the sound of things, Vizquel had dealt with some sort of insect infestation here. Come to think of it...this old lady matched what we knew of one of the clients Ruijerd had observed her working for.

"So long as you do the job quick and proper, I couldn't care less if

you're the *real* Dead End!"

Nokopara wasn't the only one startled by that comment. Ruijerd's eyes went wide as well.

"L-Listen, lady..."

"Hell, I'm an old woman. I don't have much time left either way. If I had a chance to meet a real Superd at the end, I'd take it every time."

Nokopara's eyes darted around uncertainly for a moment, but then he turned forcefully to Vizquel with a scowl. "Vizquel! Let's see yer adventurer card!"

Vizquel started in surprise, but then a small smile spread across her face. She took out her card and showed it off to everyone. The final line, of course, now read "Party: Dead End."

"What the—damn it! Are you kiddin' me?!"

At this point, P Hunter no longer existed. An examination of the guild's records would probably have revealed why. And with a bit more work, evidence of our rule-breaking might also have emerged. But at least for now, this didn't seem to occur to Nokopara.

"To hell with this! We're goin' to the next one!"

With a small smirk on my face, I followed as he stomped off to the next address on his list.

By the time we'd visited several dozen former clients, Nokopara's face had somehow gone from red to blue.

"Shit! What's goin' on here?!"

Everyone we spoke to had the impression that Jalil and Vizquel were members of Dead End all along. Their adventurer cards even backed up that story.

There was even a feel-good moment near the very end when we came to the girl who'd been our first ever client; she'd yelped with joy and hugged Ruijerd's leg.

"I'm sorry, Nokopara, but I don't think we can pay you if you

can't produce any proof."

"God dammit..."

Forget paying, maybe I'd report *him* to the guild. I could always accuse him of "obstructing" us from finishing our jobs or something.

"Heheheh..." As I snickered evilly to myself, the final destination on Nokopara's list came into view.

It was...apparently the Wolfclaw Inn. It seemed Jalil had taken on some odd job in the place that we were staying. Bluffing our way through this might be harder if we had to deal with anyone who actually knew us, but I felt like we'd barely spoken with the innkeeper. We'd probably manage somehow.

"Here. They're the last ones."

Two people emerged from the Wolfclaw Inn's front door. I froze at the sight of them.

This was *not* good. There were about fifteen different alarm bells going off in my head: *Emergency. Emergency. Red alert. Air raid incoming! Unanticipated contingency!* All too late, I understood just how thoughtless and stupid I'd really been.

"Oh, Rudeus. You're back. Good to see you, man... Uh, what's with all these people?"

We were face to face with the surviving members of the Tokurabu Village Toughs. There was deep exhaustion on Kurt's face, but he still greeted us in a friendly tone of voice.

"Hey there, kid. You remember who saved you in the Petrified Forest? That was Dead End, right?"

Ah, crap.

I don't know if Nokopara had picked up on my panic, or if he'd planned to ask that question from the start. But either way, he had us now.

Dead End's current party rank was D. The task P Hunter had accepted was ranked B. In other words, we couldn't possibly have taken that job. Our story was about to fall apart.

"What...?"

Kurt looked over at me and Rudeus. I shook my head frantically, trying to tell him to keep his mouth shut.

Come on! You're a proud kid! No one helped you! You got through that mess all by yourselves, right?

If the kid would at least insist he had no idea what Nokopara was talking about, we still had a chance. I just had to pray his stubborn pride would come through for us.

Meeting my desperate gaze, Kurt nodded decisively. "Of course it was! I've never seen anyone as strong as these guys before!"

Oh my. What an honest boy!

He proceeded to explain just how strong we really were, describing our defeat of the Executioner and the Almond Anacondas in a vigorous style that involved tons of sound effects.

"Seriously, Rudeus is freaking crazy! Those Execs are hella scary, no doubt, but that one shoulda never got on Dead End's bad side! This was a one-on-one fight, right? Exec versus Rudeus! How do you think that went? *Boom! Splat!* It was over in one shot, man! One shot! Oh, and Ruijerd's unbelievable too! He was just, like, *fwoosh!* And then *kablam*, there go the anacondas! He was doing all this ridiculous stuff without even batting an eye! Seriously, I got goosebumps!"

Nokopara listened to the entire story with a great big grin on his face, tossing in the occasional, "Wow, ain't that something," or, "No kidding?" When Kurt finally ran out of steam, he turned back to us.

"Well, that's awful weird. Didn't you guys take a job around the city? Why were you off in the forest savin' kids from monsters?"

"Uh, well...we just tagged along with Jalil on that one..."

"Sorry, but Jalil and Vizquel were in the city that whooooole time."

It was over. No point pretending anymore. Nokopara had obviously figured out how to use this to drive our backs against the wall.

Calm down! You've still got a chance here!

Focus, man. For now, we need some options to choose from. Let's say three. Uh, all right. Here we go...

1. Kill Nokopara

If he really did have a bunch of co-conspirators, like he claimed, this plan would end very badly. But there was also a chance it might go

off smoothly.

It was a total dice roll, in other words. Bad idea.

2. Blame Jalil for everything

We were newbies, and Jalil was a veteran. If I started screaming that he tricked us into this and took advantage of us, we might slip off the hook.

However, trying this one would cost me Ruijerd's friendship. Betraying our "comrades" would just be wrong after all. Another bad idea.

3. Cough up the money now, find a way out later

This was another dice roll. I might find some way to resolve things quickly, but now that Nokopara knew we were dangerous, he'd probably set up a multi-layered scheme to keep us trapped in this city and safely in his gang's clutches. Another bad idea.

Well, now I had three terrible plans to pick from. That was clearly time well spent!

What the hell was I going to do?

The single simplest way out was plan two, but it was probably the worst choice by a long shot. Whatever its immediate benefits, we'd be crippling ourselves in the long run.

Betraying Jalil and Vizquel would mean losing Ruijerd's trust for good. He'd probably never listen to a word I spoke ever again.

Plan two was off the table. Absolutely off the table.

Plan one was no good either. It was just...senseless. I'd derail myself completely off the path I'd been following up until today. It didn't matter how casually people viewed death on the Demon Continent; that wasn't even the issue here. If I killed Nokopara now just to get myself out of trouble, I'd start solving all my problems the same way. I wasn't ready to commit to murdering my way through my life.

Plan three wasn't any better though. By handing money over to these people, we'd be admitting our own guilt. That was the *last* thing I

wanted to do.

There was also a real possibility we'd end up breaking other rules, or even laws, as they were squeezing cash out of us. That would give Nokopara more leverage over us; his demands would likely escalate. He might even try to get his grubby hands on Eris... I knew I would if I were him. If it came to that, we'd be forced to kill him after all.

But even so...it basically *had* to be plan three, right?

No, no. Compared to going down that road, we may as well pick plan one from the start. We'd just have to kill Nokopara. And all his friends too.

Was that just...my only option here? Was I really going to do this? Did I *have* to?

I honestly didn't know if I could bring myself to murder someone. And how were we going to deal with the rest of his gang, wherever they were? Maybe Ruijerd could track them down somehow. But how? If he didn't even know who he was looking for, that third eye of his probably wouldn't do us much good.

There was always the option of just giving up on the "adventurer" thing. We could find ways to survive, even without the guild. I had a decent sense for the ways we could earn money on this continent by now.

Still...let's say I made that call, painful as it may be. What would happen to Jalil and Vizquel? Not only had they participated in our scheme, the guild's investigation might turn up evidence of their pet abduction business. Our party had some money saved up and no particular attachment to this city, but the two of them were different. This was their home, and they might end up getting driven out of it. Those two didn't have the skills to survive out in the wilderness. Wouldn't abandoning them just be another kind of betrayal? Could we take them in after they were banished?

No. Not a chance. It would be hard enough dealing with our own problems; we couldn't possibly take care of them as well.

...Okay, to hell with this. I need to steel myself. I'll become a killer if I have to.

Remember the goal. I have to get Eris back home safe, no matter what. To make that happen, I'm willing to betray both Jalil and Ruijerd. I don't

care if Eris ends up hating me. I don't care if I can never look Paul or Roxy in the eye again!

I'll flood this whole damn city with a Saint-tier spell. Eris and I can make a run for it in the confusion. Let them take away my status as an adventurer if they want to. I'm going to reach my goal, no matter how low I have to sink.

Just you watch!

With my mind made up at last, I began gathering magical energy in my hands... then noticed the look on Nokopara's face.

"Wha...ah..."

He'd gone white as a sheet all of a sudden, and his knees were trembling. He wasn't looking at me though; he was staring at something behind me.

I turned around. Ruijerd was standing there, looking very... wet. A water jug I'd noticed out behind the inn lay on the ground next to him.

"R-Ruijerd...?"

His hair shone emerald green in the sunlight. It was soaking wet. He'd dumped the water over his head and washed out the blue dye. He'd also undone his headband to expose the red "jewel" on his forehead.

"H-he's a...S-S-Superd..."

Nokopara had fallen backward, landing on his bottom.

"I am Ruijerd Superdia, also known as Dead End. It appears my identity has been exposed. I suppose I'll have to kill you all now."

Ruijerd delivered his line in a stiff, unnatural monotone. The man really wasn't cut out to be an actor. Still, the rage in his eyes was real.

"Aaaaaaah!"

Someone let out an ear-piercing shriek.

And suddenly, everyone on the street was screaming—girls, young men, and old people alike. They dropped whatever they were carrying

and ran for their lives.

As the chaos spread, Jalil was the first to betray us. Shouting, “They threatened me! I didn’t know anything! I’m not on their side!” he turned and ran, taking Vizquel with him.

Kurt’s legs had given out under him. Maybe he was remembering how sharply he’d spoken to Ruijerd just the other day... His face was deathly pale, and it looked like he was pissing himself.

Why were they all so terrified all of a sudden? It was still *Ruijerd*. His hair color had just changed, that was all. I couldn’t begin to understand it.

You guys were acting normally up until now, right? Come on, Kurt. You were just talking up Ruijerd like he was some sort of superhero. You said you wanted to be like him someday, remember? You were looking at him with respect in your eyes! So why? Why are you so afraid of him now that his hair’s green? Look at Eris, man. She doesn’t have any idea what’s going on, but she’s staying calm, right? She’s standing there with her arms folded, her feet wide apart, and her chin in the air. Quietly watching all this with her eyes wide open.

So why’s everyone else freaking out?

Many of the people around us were fleeing in a blind panic. Others were sitting in the street. A few had drawn their weapons, although their legs were wobbling. There’d been many different types of people in the area, but they were *all* trembling now.

All this because of one guy with green hair?

I knew the people here feared Dead End. But I didn’t know they feared him *this* much. I didn’t know how visceral their terror was.

Hah.

It kind of made me want to laugh. What was the point of all my plans and scheming anyway? They took one look at his real hair color, and this is what we got. Did I really think my little PR plan was going to change a thing? How ridiculous. Maybe I assumed everyone would come to understand him, the way Eris and the Migurd did. But that was never going to be possible.

This wasn’t a question of countering a few ugly rumors. For these people, the Superd were terror personified. And I wanted to change that? What a joke. It was hopeless from the start.

As all hell broke loose around him, Ruijerd slowly walked up to Nokopara. "You there. Your name was Nokopara, wasn't it?" Grabbing the horse-man by the neck, he pulled him up off the ground. Nokopara's body looked heavy, but Ruijerd lifted him effortlessly.

"Ruijerd! Don't kill him!" Even now that it had come to this, I found myself shouting out a warning. If he killed Nokopara under these circumstances, with everyone watching, the name "Dead End" would be tainted forever.

Honestly, though, wasn't it already? Was there any point to holding back now?

Nope, not really. Forget it. Go get him, Berserker!

"I-I'm sorry! I h-had no idea you were the real deal! P-please, don't kill me! Please!" Ruijerd's face was full of rage. Nokopara was shaking like a leaf.

"Hey, what the heck is going on?!" hissed Eris, sounding a bit unnerved.

"We're in the middle of a worst-case scenario," I responded slowly.

"So why aren't you doing anything about it?!"

"Because there's nothing I *can* do. Sorry."

"Well, I guess we're really out of luck then!"

The girl gave up quickly enough. In her defense, I'd already done the same a while ago. There was no fixing this mess. And it was all my fault. I'd assumed we could always "figure something out," even if somebody caught on. I'd let myself believe we could improvise our way through any unexpected trouble. And this disaster was the result.

Now that events had come this far, the only real way I could intervene would be to carry out my original idea and wash the slate clean.

Like, with a magic tidal wave. Good one, right? Hahaha.

"P-please, ya gotta have mercy! I-I've got three...no, seven hungry kids at home!" Nokopara pleaded for his life in a somewhat incoherent fashion. It was fairly obvious those kids didn't exist. Even I could have managed to come up with something more convincing.

"...I'm leaving this city. And *you* are going to forget you ever met

me.”

Still, Ruijerd let him off the hook right away. I suppose the reference to children was probably a factor there.

“R-right, right! Th-thank ya so much!”

Relief washed over Nokopara’s face...for an instant at least.

“However you had better hope our status as adventurers hasn’t been revoked by the time we reach the next town.”

Ruijerd jabbed his trident forward and sliced a single shallow cut across Nokopara’s cheek. A wet stain spread across the front of the horse-man’s pants, and something bulged out in the rear.

“Don’t assume you’re safe within this city’s walls...”

Nokopara nodded vigorously and repeatedly.

When Ruijerd dropped him, he hit the ground with a nasty squelch.

Before long, Ruijerd was chased out of Rikarisu. Taking all the blame for everything on his shoulders, he fled into the wilderness.

That was an ugly, frustrating day. Ruijerd set off running all by himself, leaving us behind. Soon enough, guardsmen ran up to ask everyone what had happened, and I insisted Ruijerd had done nothing wrong. But in their eyes, of course, I was just a child. They decided that he must have intimidated me into saying that.

Before long, everyone arrived at the conclusion that Ruijerd had been planning out some evil plot here, using us as his pawns; the details of his scheme were unclear, but at least he’d never gotten the chance to carry it out. Everyone around us looked at me and Eris with pity in their eyes. They were convinced that we were naïve children who’d been manipulated by a vicious devil.

I was so angry I could have punched someone. What exactly had Ruijerd done wrong anyway? All of this was *my* fault. None of it would have happened if I hadn’t gotten so damn complacent.

Eris and I returned to the Wolfclaw Inn, gathered up our few

possessions, and left it for good. We needed to hurry, or Ruijerd might wander off somewhere. It wasn't like we could stick around in this city ourselves anyway. Nokopara was still alive, as were his supposed allies. And the fact remained that we'd broken the guild's rules. Once things calmed down a little, we'd be boxed in again—and without Ruijerd to rely on.

“Hey, Rudeus...”

As we were walking out of the inn, Kurt approached us with an uncertain expression on his face. I didn't know what to say to him honestly.

“Why the heck are you guys travelling with that monster?”

“Don't call him a monster. You remember who saved you in that forest, right? Where do you get off pissing your pants at the sight of him?”

“Well, uh...that's true, I guess. My bad...”

Okay, there's no point taking it out on Kurt. He was trying to help us back there. “Sorry, Kurt. That wasn't fair.”

“Nah, it's fine. It's not like you were wrong.”

He really was a good kid. Although Eris was still glaring at him with her hands clenched at her sides.

“I've got a favor to ask. I want you to pay us back for saving your life.”

“Okay,” Kurt said, his expression growing more serious. “What do you need?”

“Ruijerd really isn't a bad person. People are afraid of him because of things that happened a long time ago, but he's a good guy. I want you to spread that around the city, even after we leave.”

“Uh...right. Got it. I guess I do...owe him my life after all...” The kid didn't sound entirely convinced.

Oh well. He seemed like an earnest type. Maybe he'd actually keep his promise.

I stopped by the Adventurers' Guild and removed Jalil and Vizquel from Dead End. I also asked the clerk to pass on a brief message for them: “Sorry it came to this, but thanks for all your help. You've got

his gratitude as well.”

Those two did betray us at the very end, but you could hardly blame them for that. It was the only option they had to save themselves. Putting aside how things ended, they’d definitely helped us out a great deal.

On our way to the gate out of town, I stopped to buy a lizard-like reptile trained to carry people and luggage. It was a large creature with six legs and charmingly bulgy eyes. On this continent, they were basically used in place of horse-drawn carriages. This particular species could easily accommodate two adult riders at once. It cost us ten iron coins—about half of all our money on hand. But I’d decided some time ago that I was going to buy one of these when we hit the road again. Having one supposedly made it much, much easier to navigate the Demon Continent.

After a brief tutorial from the merchant on how to control the thing, I loaded it up with our bags and we headed out of Rikarisu. There were a large number of soldiers gathered around the gate. Maybe they were preparing to try and chase down Ruijerd or something. Their faces were pale, but their expressions were excited.

When I stopped to say hello, they warned us to be careful out there, since Dead End had fled the city not long ago.

From that point, they proceeded to emphasize that Dead End was a bloodthirsty devil, and speculated about what evil deeds he’d been getting up to inside the city—not that they’d ever even seen him.

After a while, I just couldn’t bite my tongue anymore. “That man was in the city for nearly two months, and he didn’t cause any trouble at all.”

The guards looked at me like I’d grown a second head. I glared at them, clicked my tongue in irritation, and finally walked out of the city. I was in a truly foul mood.

Right now, we needed to meet up with Ruijerd. Was he still somewhere nearby? I had to assume so. If his pride as a warrior was still intact, there was no way he’d abandon us...or Eris at least.

“I guess this should be far enough.”

Once the city was completely out of sight, I sent a magic firework into the sky. It burst in mid-air with a ferocious boom, producing a flash

of light and a wave of heat.

We waited for a while, but Ruijerd didn't appear.

"Eris, can you call for him as well?"

Eris shouted out Ruijerd's name at the top of her lungs. Which was incidentally pretty loud.

This time, something did appear after a while. But it was a group of Pax Coyotes. I took out my irritation on them.

Soon enough, the rocky area we were standing in was transformed into a perfectly flat plateau, and the monsters were reduced to bloody chunks.

Could they still come back as zombies, even from this state?

Hmph. Not my problem. That city can deal with it.

"Look, it's Ruijerd!"

Not long after the battle ended, our wayward Superd finally made an appearance. There was a guilty look on his face; that just made me feel even worse.

"Why didn't you show up when we called for you? Were you planning to run off somewhere without a word to us?"

Yet for some reason, the first words that came out of my mouth were accusatory. This wasn't what I'd wanted to say at all.

"I'm sorry." Ruijerd led with an apology. Awkward.

This whole mess was obviously *my* fault. I got cocky and careless. I made the call to team up with Jalil and Vizquel because I wanted a quicker and easier way forward. When Nokopara threatened us, I just assumed we'd manage to wriggle our way out of it. But then we got backed against the wall, and Ruijerd had to clean up my mess for me. If he hadn't made himself the scapegoat, we may have gotten trapped in that city for good. I couldn't even blame bad luck for the way things went. Nokopara was a pro at blackmail. He would have cornered us somehow, even if Kurt hadn't given us away.

"For what? I'm the one who owes you an apology." I felt like such a piece of crap.

"No. You did everything you could, Rudeus."

"But..."

“Even the best-laid battle plans go awry. I know how thoroughly you thought about every detail, every step we took, day in and day out.”

Suddenly, Ruijerd smiled and placed his hand gently on my head. “I didn’t know what you were thinking of course. And I’ll admit that, until today, I suspected your goals to be immoral. For that reason, there were times I could barely abide your decisions...”

He paused to glance over at Eris, then nodded to himself. “But now I understand that you were simply desperate to protect something, no matter what the cost. I saw that in your eyes just now, when you were ready to kill that man.”

Just now...? Oh, when I was about to flood the city...

“You fight to protect something, Rudeus. And that makes you a warrior.”

When Ruijerd spoke those words, I actually had to fight back tears. I didn’t deserve that sort of praise. I was a shallow, short-sighted person. All I ever thought about was making money and finding ways to get ahead. I’d even been ready to abandon Ruijerd himself. I nearly cast aside the one ally we could rely on to the bitter end.

“Ruijerd, I... I’m...”

I wanted to be honest with him. I wanted to tell him something—in my own words, plain and simple, without hiding behind superficial politeness. Even if I didn’t know exactly what that “something” was.

“Don’t say anything.” But he cut me off before I could. “From this point on, put your goals ahead of mine.”

“Huh...?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect the two of you, even if you don’t improve my reputation. Trust me...please.”

I did trust him. Of course I trusted him.

Which meant we didn’t have to help him anymore.

It made sense. Spreading the word about Ruijerd was no easy task, and trying to pursue two goals at once made it difficult to really focus on either. We may have been stretching ourselves too thin. I’d been under so much stress lately at least. I’d overlooked some things that really should have occurred to me, and failed to think through a

number of important details. A situation like that can easily lead to disasters like the one we'd just experienced.

And so, we didn't have to help Ruijerd anymore.

But I couldn't accept that. Not after seeing what I'd just seen. Not after watching everyone basically chase him out of town with pitchforks. I couldn't bring myself to say, "All right then. Just wait outside next time we reach a city."

"I can't do that, Ruijerd. I'll fix your reputation, no matter what."

If anything, his offer only made my determination stronger. I owed him at *least* this much for everything he'd done. I was just going to have to do a better job from now on. I wasn't going to push myself past my limits again, but I'd still do everything I could.

"Haven't you learned your lesson, Rudeus? Am I really so untrustworthy?"

"I do trust you. That's why I *want* to help you reach your goal."

I was bullied myself, back in the day. People slapped a label on me, one that I never managed to remove. And I suffered for it. I spent decades by myself. If Roxy hadn't dragged me outside, I might never have escaped that isolation; I might never have even met Sylphie or Eris.

Ruijerd was a more complicated case, of course, and the scale of his problem was incomparable to mine. But that was no reason for me to give up on him. Roxy had helped me without even meaning to, but I wasn't Roxy. I'd have to keep trying, keep screwing up, and slowly crawl my way forward through the mud.

It may be a total nuisance, from Ruijerd's perspective. There may be more disasters like this in store, when he'd have to clean up my mess for me. But that was fine by me.

I'd rather fail than not even try.

"...You're certainly a stubborn one."

"You're one to talk, Ruijerd."

"Hah... All right then. Let's do what we can, I suppose."

With a wry smile, Ruijerd nodded slightly.

For some reason...in that moment, I felt like I'd finally earned his trust for good.

When I woke up the next morning, Ruijerd was as bald as a cue ball.

The sight left me dumbfounded. Also a little freaked out, honestly. In combination with that scar on his face, it made him look like a yakuza.

“What happened yesterday made it clear that my hair frightens people, so I got rid of it.”

That...must have taken real resolve. Back in Japan, shaving yourself bald was a way of expressing single-minded determination, or showing remorse for some huge mistake. Things were different in this world of course. But even so...seeing Ruijerd like this, I sort of felt like I should follow his example.

The best way to atone is through action after all.

Do I really want to shave myself bald too? I mean, I did screw up here, right? But...hmm... Man, I dunno...

“U-uh, Eris? You think I should do that too?”

“Don’t you dare. I like your hair the way it is, Rudeus.”

Yeah, okay. So I ended up using Eris to get myself off the hook. Go on, laugh at me. I deserve it.

Chapter 14: The Beginning of Our Journey

For me, as a member of the Dragon Quest generation, the words “Demon Continent” naturally bring to mind the concept of a “Demon Realm.” You know...a dark land ruled over by an all-powerful Demon King, with small villages populated by monsters, long-forgotten ancient shrines, and fearsome creatures swaggering around all over the place.

It wasn’t really like that in this world though. For one thing, that all-powerful Demon King was nowhere to be found.

Which isn’t to say that “Demon Kings” didn’t exist. In fact, there were roughly thirty of them at the moment, and they all had at least a bit of territory to lord over. But they weren’t *rulers* really. They just called themselves kings and acted like they owned the neighborhood.

Each Demon King did have something like a guard squad or a band of knights, typically with impressive-sounding names. The soldiers in Rikaristu technically belonged to one of these. They complemented the activities of adventurers by exterminating dangerous monsters in the area, capturing criminals in town, and otherwise taking independent action to protect their homes. More of a city watch or local militia than an army really.

I wasn’t that clear on the exact relationship between the local Demon King and those guys. Did he actually issue them orders, or were they just calling themselves his soldiers? They’d presumably be his army if he ever went to war, so I guess there was some sort of contract in place.

At the moment, no one was fighting any wars, and things were relatively peaceful. But that only applied when you were in the neighborhood of a specific Demon King. The majority of the Demon Continent was completely lawless.

Things may be calm around Southern Cross and the Holy Emperor’s Mausoleum, but everything in between was rampant with mohawk-sporting biker gangs basically.

In any case, the Demon King who controlled the area around

Rikarisu was named Badigadi. He was said to be a muscular, macho guy with six arms and black skin. At the moment, however, he'd set off on an aimless journey, and no one had any idea where he was. Sounded like something of a free spirit.

At any rate, the Demon Continent was crawling with powerful creatures. There was a reason the Adventurers' Guild put all the monster-slaying jobs at rank C or higher; basically every monster you could find here was at least that tough. Stone Treants were maybe just barely D-ranked.

That said, demonfolk were generally stronger than humans. They were also very good in group combat, as the unique abilities of various sub-races helped them play specific roles. Hitting rank B was still a real challenge for most people, but the adventurers who got there were stronger than the B-rankers you'd find elsewhere. Those who couldn't get that far usually ended up like Nokopara or Jalil.

The more I thought about it, the more incredible Ruijerd seemed. The man said he could take down A-ranked monsters singlehandedly, and I believed him. All by himself, he was stronger than a group of six or seven skilled B-ranked adventurers.

You had to be pretty happy about earning the trust of someone like that, right?

Three days had passed since we left the city of Rikarisu. I'm not sure if it had anything to do with the fact that I was feeling a bit more relaxed after winning over Ruijerd, but my appetite was growing increasingly ferocious.

The problem was, we didn't have anything good to work with. We were mostly living off Great Tortoise meat, and Great Tortoise meat wasn't my idea of a good time. I decided to try and improve our culinary situation slightly. The stuff was gross when you roasted it, so we may as well try a different method.

Using magic, I whipped up a large clay pot, a basic but powerful cooking stove, and some delicious Greyrat-family artisanal water. It was

everything we needed to make a basic stew. Water was a precious resource around here, but I could produce it in unlimited quantities.

Initially, I wanted to use a pressure cooker to get the meat really nice and tender...but the first one I tried to make very nearly exploded, so I decided not to pursue that idea. Cooking the meat this way did take significantly longer, but we didn't have a gas or water bill to worry about. I was willing to watch lovingly over that simmering pot for hours if I had to. It was particularly convenient that I could make all the cookware we needed using Earth magic, making it disposable.

One of these days, I wanted to give smoking the meat a try as well...but Stone Treant chips probably wouldn't imbue it with too pleasant a flavor.

Stewing the Great Tortoise meat did make it somewhat more edible. Instead of chewing on nasty tough meat, we now had nasty *tender* meat.

Yeah, it was still nasty. You couldn't simmer that pungent aroma out of it, and the flavor was what it was.

It was weird, honestly. I could have sworn this stuff tasted much better back at that Migurd village. Were we missing something?

After a moment's thought, it finally dawned on me.

It must have been those plants they were growing inside the village. I thought they were half-dead vegetable crops, but that wasn't the case. That plant was probably some sort of herb or spice... something they used to hide the stench of their meat and improve its flavor. I'd been totally misled by Roxy's description of them as "bitter and unpleasant." They were used for seasoning; you weren't supposed to eat them on their own.

Good grief. My master could be such a blockhead sometimes.

I made a mental note to try and buy some spices of that kind if any were available in the next city we visited. I wanted to pick up some other ingredients as well, just for variety's sake, but maybe it would be a waste of money. Food tended to be expensive on this continent. Vegetables were particularly pricey, since the region was inhospitable to plant life. You could buy five kilograms of meat for the cost of something that resembled a scraggly ginseng root.

Great Tortoise meat was cheap. It was the staple food around

here, more or less. Those things were larger than a five-ton truck, so killing one would get you enough meat to keep a family sated for quite a while.

Of course, you couldn't feed an entire city that way. Sometimes people ate Pax Coyotes, or even the larva of insects that lived inside Treants. Brave as she was, Eris hadn't been too interested in trying the latter.

Not that I felt any differently. The culinary culture of this continent wasn't exactly to my liking. Depending on how you cooked it, Great Tortoise meat could at least be edible. By the standards of Demon Continent fare, it was probably on the "tasty" side. I could just barely understand where Ruijerd was coming from when he called it delicious.

Still, I *really* needed to get my hands on some seasoning.

Eris and Ruijerd seemed content to eat their meat plain though. In other words, I'd be making the call to buy the spices all by myself.

That wasn't good. We were a team after all.

We probably needed to get into the habit of talking our decisions over as a group.

"Gather 'round, everyone!" I shouted.

It was just about our usual bedtime. Eris was looking for a good spot to place the rolled-up bundle of cloth she used as a pillow, and Ruijerd was beginning to scan the area for enemies with his eyes closed. But tonight, we had something to take care of first. "I'd like to call a group meeting."

"A group meeting?" Eris said, tilting her head quizzically.

"Yes. I expect us to run into a variety of problems on our travels. By talking things through and making some important decisions in advance, we can avoid getting into arguments when time is of the essence."

"Wait..." There was a dubious expression on Eris's face. Maybe she wasn't interested in dealing with the details? Ruijerd and I could probably make all the decisions by ourselves, but leaving her out felt

like a bad idea. Eris wasn't a piece of baggage, she was a member of the group. I needed her to participate.

"Isn't this that thing you used to do every month back home?"

Every month...? Oh, she's talking about those conferences I held with her other instructors, back when I was tutoring her in Fittoa. I'd honestly forgotten all about those.

"That's right. This is the adventurer-party version though."

Zippering her mouth shut, Eris dropped herself in front of me with a thump. She was clearly *trying* to look very serious, but there was an uncontrollable grin on her face. That seemed a little weird. It wasn't like we were doing anything fun here, but at least she wasn't complaining.

"Am I to participate in this as well?" asked Ruijerd.

There wouldn't be much point to it if you didn't, man... "Of course. Didn't you have group discussions like this back in your warrior band?"

"No. I made all the decisions by myself."

That was the way things usually worked in this world, I suppose: the leader calls the shots, and everyone else just follows orders. But I happened to grow up in a democracy. "As of today, I want to talk things out among the three of us and make decisions as a group."

"Very well." With an easy nod, Ruijerd sat down as well. The three of us now formed a circle beside our campfire.

"All right then. I hereby call the first 'Dead End Team Meeting' to order. Applause, please!"

Clap clap clap. Clap clap clap.

"Rudeus, why are we clapping?"

"That's just how these things work."

"You didn't do this in those meetings with Ghislaine though."

How did she even know that? Well, whatever. "This is our very first meeting, which makes it an occasion worth commemorating, okay? That's why we're applauding."

Also, we're adventurers, not tutors. May as well keep things lively, right?

"Ahem. Now then! As we all know, I recently screwed up big

time.”

“No, that wasn’t your—“

“Quiet, *please!*” I shouted, doing my best impression of a high-strung lady in triangular glasses. “Ruijerd, if you want to respond, raise your hand after the current speaker finishes.”

“Understood.”

“All right then.” Now that I’d overpowered Ruijerd into silence, I continued. “I’ve already identified a number of factors that contributed to my failure.”

I was lax about gathering information, too focused on making money quickly, over-eager to kill two birds with one stone...etcetera, etcetera. I was going to make a personal effort to be careful about all that, but I also had a more systematic solution in mind.

“As a precautionary measure, I want all of us to make sure we *report* when something happens, *communicate* our thoughts, and *consult* each other about our options. Report, communicate, consult. That’s ReCoCo for short. Remember that, please! It’s important!”

“Uh... ReCoCo, is it?”

An excellent buzzword, if I do say so myself. Sounds almost French!

“That’s right, ReCoCo. First of all, I want the three of us consulting each other constantly!”

“Hrm. What would this involve specifically?”

“When something’s troubling you, or there’s something you want to do, bring it to the group instead of keeping it to yourself.”

To be honest, I didn’t have much practical experience with that type of discussion myself...but we didn’t have to make this too complicated. Making an effort was the important thing.

“I’m planning on asking you two for your opinions also. When someone ‘consults’ you, listen carefully and think the matter through. Ask yourself if it’s a good idea or not, and why. Sometimes, you may come up with an even better plan or something.”

In retrospect, I’d made most of my decisions without asking Ruijerd for any input at all. I always told him that I trusted him, but maybe deep down that wasn’t true.

“Secondly, *communicate!* When you realize or notice something,

make an effort to speak up and tell each other about it.”

Eris was nodding, but the look on her face suggested she was thinking hard. It was tough to tell if she was really following me.

“Last but not least, *report!* The details can frequently be important, but you can keep it simple if you want. Just make sure to inform me when something goes wrong...or when something goes right.”

I was still technically the leader of this group after all. I needed to act like it.

“Any questions so far, people?”

“None. Please continue.”

Ruijerd shook his head, but Eris raised her hand. “I have one!”

“Yes, Eris?”

“So the three of us are going to *consult* about stuff, but you’re the one who makes the final decision, right?”

“Well, at the end of the day, I suppose I will.”

“Why don’t you just make all the decisions right away then?”

“There’s a limit to how much I can think through all by myself.”

“But I’m never going to have any ideas *you* couldn’t think up, Rudeus!”

It was nice of her to say that, but to be perfectly honest, I was also looking for some reassurance here. I wanted the chance to run my plans past them and hear something like, “That should work fine,” or, “You’ll pull it off, no problem.”

“Even if that’s true, you may say something that gets me thinking in a different way, and points me toward a better idea.”

“You think...?”

Eris didn’t seem to fully understand the point of this. But that was probably to be expected for now. The important thing was to get all three of us using our heads.

“Well then...moving on. For the moment, I’d like to discuss our future course of action.”

Our journey across the Demon Continent had begun abruptly, with no time to plan ahead or prepare ourselves. We were going to have to figure things out on the fly as best we could.

“First of all, let’s discuss our destination. Our ultimate goal is to reach the Kingdom of Asura, on the west side of the Central Continent. No objections there, I assume?”

The two of them nodded.

Of course, reaching the Central Continent was easier said than done. We couldn’t cross over to it directly from the Demon Continent; there was no sea route that connected them. The fishfolk ruled the seas on this world, and everyone else could only travel across them on a limited number of predetermined lines.

“Ruijerd, how can we reach the Millis Continent?”

“Boats travel to it from Wind Port, the Demon Continent’s southernmost city.”

Which meant...we needed to head all the way down to the very bottom of the Demon Continent, cross over to Millis, cut across it to the western coast, and catch a boat there to the eastern seaboard of the Central Continent.

It wasn’t technically our only option. There was something of a “backdoor route” as well. You could travel to the northwest of the Demon Continent, then cross over to the Divine Continent. This allowed you to reach the Central Continent without going all the way down to Millis. Theoretically, it could cut several months off the necessary travel time.

However, this route wasn’t as simple as it sounded. The Divine Continent was totally encircled by steep walls of rock. Unless you had wings, it was essentially impossible to make it up there. That meant we’d be crawling our way around the bottom of the cliffs. There were no roads down there, and no stable footing either. There were also many, many monsters. Supposedly, only one in twenty who risked that journey lived to tell the tale.

On top of it all, even if you managed to survive the Divine Continent, the next sea route took you to the north of the Central Continent—its most inhospitable region by far. Only desperate criminals with bounty hunters hot on their trail ever chose this option.

The potential time gain was only theoretical. It would probably take significantly more time if we actually attempted it. There wasn’t much reason to put ourselves in mortal danger in exchange for a minor difference in the length of our trip.

Which meant...our only real option was to head south.

“Do you know how much the fare will be?”

“No idea.”

“How long will it take us to travel all the way down there?”

“Quite a while, I’d expect. If we stayed on the road continuously... perhaps six months?”

Six months even at a constant march? This is going to be a real hike...

“Is there any way we can get there faster? Like a teleportation circle or something?”

“The use of teleportation circles was forbidden in the aftermath of the Second Great Human-Demon War. Some may remain intact, but using them would likely be difficult.”

Huh. I wasn’t being too serious, but I guess there really are teleportals out there. “So we’re basically stuck plodding along on the ground then?”

“That’s right.”

There were apparently no high-speed transportation options to speak of. Travelling for six months straight sounded...pretty daunting.

Maybe I was just thinking about this the wrong way though. We weren’t *actually* going to stay on the road for months at a time; we were going to move along bit by bit, hopping from one city to the next. Slow but steady. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step and all that.

“Okay. Well, let’s think short-term. If we start traveling toward Wind Port now, how long will it take us to reach the next town?”

“We should arrive at a sizable city in about two weeks.”

Two weeks, huh? About what you’d expect out here, I guess. “Do you know if it has an Adventurers’ Guild?”

“I would expect so.”

According to Ruijerd, in the old days the Demon subraces all created their own small villages, and cities developed as central locations for them to trade, mingle, and exchange information with one another. As a result, modest-sized “towns” didn’t really exist on this continent, and you could expect any city to have a guild that employed warriors from the local peoples.

Originally, before the guild's existence, the cities were protected by warriors chosen to represent the various races living in the area. Sometimes a more warlike people would dispatch additional fighters on behalf of a race who rarely fought; the Superd and Migurd apparently had a relationship like that at some point. Marriages between different peoples were also common from the start, as a means of strengthening such bonds between villages. No wonder there was such a wide variety of Demons... The whole continent was probably full of mixed-race people.

Whoops. Wandering a bit off-topic here.

"All right then. In general, I think we should make our way south by traveling between cities with guilds in them."

After reaching each new city, we'd stay for a week or two. Unless we lost our status as adventurers, we could take on guild tasks and spread the word about Dead End. Once we scraped together enough cash to buy supplies for our journey to the next city, we'd get right back on the road again.

"...That's the general pattern I have in mind at least. Do you two have any questions or opinions about any of this?"

Ruijerd raised his hand. "You don't need to bother telling anyone about me. That's part of the reason I cut off my hair. Right now, I'm not even a Superd."

"Well, we won't go out of our way. We'll just do what we can while completing our tasks."

After seeing what Jalil and Vizquel had accomplished, I realized we didn't need to do anything too fancy. We'd just do our jobs politely and thoroughly and introduce "Dead End Ruijerd" to the client if it went well. And if something went wrong, "Rudeus" would be the one to step up and take the blame. Nice and simple. From now on, I'd be the one associated with Dead End's missteps and misdeeds.

I planned to keep that last part a secret from Ruijerd though.

What's that you say? "Didn't you just decide you should talk everything over as a group?"

Don't be such a nitpicker, buddy.

"Any questions specifically about what we're going to do while staying in the cities?"

“Yes!”

“Go ahead, Eris.” It made me a little nostalgic to see her raising her hand like this. Almost felt like we were back in the classroom again.

“Are we going to look around to see what the shops are charging for stuff, like you used to?”



“Oh, you mean my market research...?” Hrm. Come to think of it, I’d slacked off on that in Rikarisu. I really had been rushing around thoughtlessly back there. If I’d bothered to study the local market in advance, I may have managed to get our all-terrain lizard for a somewhat better price.

“Yes, let’s do that. Knowing the local prices is the first step toward spending money wisely after all. Anything else come to mind?”

Ruijerd and Eris looked at each other silently. Seemed like the answer was “no.”

Well, this was probably good enough for our first meeting. We’d no doubt run into thornier problems as we moved forward. The important thing was to talk them out slowly instead of getting into fights with each other.

“All right then. Looking forward to working with you!” With that, I bowed my head and brought things to a close.

As of that moment, our journey finally began in earnest.

We made it to the next city without anyone realizing that Ruijerd was a Superd.

To be fair, he’d shaved off *all* his hair, even his eyebrows—and on the Demon Continent, people didn’t usually do anything too dramatic with their haircuts. I got the feeling that most of them took pride in their naturally distinctive appearances.

The guards at the gate greeted us warmly.

Honestly, Ruijerd looked like nothing so much as a mafia thug or a skinhead at this point, but...maybe there were tons of guys with scary faces around these parts? The fact that we were actually dressed like adventurers this time probably made a difference too. They seemed genuinely pleased to have us. As we stepped inside the city, Ruijerd mentioned that he’d never received such a warm welcome before with a small smile on his face.

While our appearances apparently weren’t a problem anymore, when we announced ourselves as “Dead End” at the guild, quite a few

onlookers shouted questions along the lines of, “You sure that’s a good idea?”

When I replied that it wasn’t a problem since we had the man himself with us, most of them burst into uproarious laughter. It was nice to see that trick still worked. I was almost grateful for how infamous the name “Dead End” was. It made for an excellent icebreaker.

After settling into our lodgings at a local inn, we soon held another team meeting. Eris kicked things off this time, announcing, “Rudeus was sniffing my underwear while doing the laundry, and I want him to stop,” with a perfectly serious expression on her face.

I was immediately forbidden from touching Eris’s panties again. That was kind of a problem, though, since it meant only Ruijerd was now capable of doing our laundry. I wasn’t about to hand over my darling Eris’s underwear to some old pervert who couldn’t help but pat every child he saw on the head. Therefore, we taught Eris how to do the laundry, and it became one of her responsibilities moving forward.

Before too long, however, I happened to spot her furtively sniffing *my* underwear. Of course, I didn’t raise an objection. A man has to be broad-minded about these things, you know?

Gathering information didn’t prove to be too difficult. I could find out almost anything I needed to know at the Adventurers’ Guild. All I had to do was act like a child and innocently ask the other adventurers. It went so smoothly, it almost made me wish I could stay a kid forever.

Eventually, I got a bit carried away and asked a lady adventurer with a nice body what her vital statistics were, at which point Eris knocked me down and sat on me jiu-jitsu style.

Sadly, the concept of “tapping out” was a foreign one in this world.

We moved along from city to city, following this same general pattern, and made our way steadily to the south. One month slipped by, then two...

One day, Eris decided she wanted to start learning the Demon-God

Tongue.

Without Roxy's dictionary, I couldn't really put together a detailed curriculum or anything. Still, she had both Ruijerd and myself to learn from, and seemed to pick up the basics quickly. Back in the Asura Kingdom, she'd basically refused to learn how to read and write her *own* language, but I guess circumstances can change a person. It must have been very stressful to be the only one who had no idea what anyone was saying most of the time.

"My n-name is...Eris Boreas Greyrat."

"That's right. You got it, miss."

"Really?!"

Well, she still wasn't anywhere near ready to have an actual conversation, but...

Let us recall the words of Yamamoto Isoroku. "Show them, tell them, have them do it, and then praise them; otherwise, people won't do anything. Speak to them, hear them out, recognize them, and give them responsibility; otherwise, they will never grow. Watch them work with gratitude, and show your faith in them; otherwise, they will never truly blossom."

Tons of instructions there, but for the moment, I focused on the "praise them" part. "Truly splendid, miss! Superb work! You're making me all tingly!"

"...Are you making fun of me?"

"No, no! Perish the thought!"

Yeah, okay, I may have gone a little overboard there... I guess you've got to know how to praise them, too, huh?

"Hmm. You know, we're going to be leaving the Demon Continent soon, right?"

"That's the plan. We're headed to Millis next." The word "soon" felt a little optimistic there. We still had a very long road ahead of us.

"Maybe there's no point to me learning the Demon-God Tongue after all then..."

"Well, you may end up coming here again someday, right?"

Although she'd been driven to it by necessity in this case, it seemed clear that the girl still didn't *enjoy* studying very much.

While I was tutoring Eris in the Demon-God Tongue, Ruijerd was also teaching her how to fight. At first, I joined in their training sessions, but I honestly couldn't keep up. Ruijerd's method of instruction was very simple: he exchanged blows with you for a while. Before too long, you'd end up sprawled out on the ground or with the tip of his spear up against your neck. At that point, he'd simply say, "Do you understand?"

Unfortunately, I didn't understand. Not at all. No matter how many times I tried. However, Eris was a different story. Every now and then, she'd say, "Yeah, I get it now!" with an excited expression on her face.

I did theoretically understand what she was picking up from these lessons. Most likely, Ruijerd was "pointing out" our mistakes and weaknesses. Combat is fluid and dynamic. It's difficult to describe the perfect step or feint in words, so instead, he demonstrated by example. That said, I never got anything out of it except a few bruises. If I were capable of improving just by getting knocked around, I would've made more progress years ago.

Eris, on the other hand, was probably a prodigy. When it came to battle, she was on a totally different level. I found Ruijerd's combat style incomprehensible. But somehow, it made sense to her. She wasn't just pretending to understand; she was actually *learning* from him. I could see her getting stronger and stronger by the day. I didn't think she was anywhere close to Ghislaine yet, but at this point, I suspected she may be slightly better than Paul.

Could she beat me even if I used magic at this point? It felt plausible. I needed to give some real thought to how I could improve. The idea of sitting on my hands doing nothing while Eris grew steadily more powerful was just humiliating.

In pursuit of a way to get stronger, I eventually challenged Ruijerd to an all-out fight while Eris was off running an errand. I came at him with everything I had, using the tactics I'd developed to beat close-range fighters like Paul, but...

Long story short, I lost. Badly. None of my tricks, traps, or strategies were remotely effective against him.

"Not bad at all. You're already a well-rounded, powerful magician." For some reason, though, he complimented me after the fact. I seemed to remember hearing something similar from Ghislaine a long

time ago. “However, your strategic approach was poor. There’s no need for you to try and beat me in close combat.”

He explained that I should have initiated the fight from a far greater distance. It was only natural to struggle when you positioned yourself right where the enemy wanted you.

That definitely made sense, but...you don’t always get the chance to start a battle from half a mile away, right? “So what should I do when someone gets in my face?”

“Hard for me to say. Spellcasting is outside my field of expertise... The Dragonfolk are said to be proficient at using magic in close-range combat, but my only first-hand experience of that was briefly observing Perugius in battle. I couldn’t tell you much.”

“Perugius? Isn’t that the guy with the floating fortress? How did he fight?”

“Yes. He summoned his Front Wyrmgate and Rear Wyrmgate, and attacked using magic claws.”

Oh, summoning spells... I don’t know any of those though... “What types of summons are these Wyrmgate things?”

“I don’t know the specific details, but I believe the front gate constantly drains magical power from his enemies, and the rear gate feeds that power to him.”

As a result, Perugius could gain a steadily greater advantage the longer a fight dragged on. It apparently hadn’t been that effective against Laplace, who had a truly enormous supply of raw magical power...but an ordinary warrior would be sucked dry and lose consciousness in less than five minutes.

“Wow. That’s one underhanded way to win a fight.”

“...Is it?”

I’d expected Ruijerd to back me up on that one, but he didn’t seem to agree. Maybe he thought of Perugius as a comrade of sorts, since Perugius helped him strike back against his most hated enemy.

“In any case, don’t rush yourself. You’re still very young. You’ll grow stronger in due time.”

In the end, Ruijerd patted my head and offered me some consolation. He did seem to view me as a “warrior” at this point, but he

hadn't stopped with the head-patting. I think he just enjoyed it for his own sake, honestly.

Anyway. While I appreciated the sentiment, I wasn't too clear on *how* I was supposed to grow stronger.

As I grappled with these worries, our party moved slowly but steadily south. When we reached a city, we took on guild tasks there, made a name for ourselves, saved up some money, then set out for our next destination.

We repeated those same basic steps over and over again, never lingering too long in one place.

Before I knew it, five months had passed...then six.

One day, we met someone on the road who immediately challenged Ruijerd to a fight.

"My name is Rodriguez! I am the third student of Auber the Peacock Blade, pupil of the great North God Kalman!"

At first, I assumed he was some sort of bounty hunter, and someone had put a price on Ruijerd's head without us knowing about it.

"Your deportment suggests you are a man of some renown! I wish to challenge you to a duel!"

However, that didn't seem to be the case. The man explained that he was a human swordsman who'd come to the Demon Continent to train himself.

"What should we do, Ruijerd?"

"Hm. It's been a long time since I had a match of this sort..."

According to Ruijerd, the Demon Continent actually got many visitors like this. The monsters on this continent were strong, as were the adventurers who hunted them down. This made it an ideal place for warriors to hone their skills.

Wandering around with no objective except "getting stronger" seemed pointless to me, but whatever.

"I wouldn't mind accepting, but what do you think?"

"I think you have every right to refuse. What do you *want* to do though?"

“I am a warrior. When someone asks me for a bout, I would prefer to oblige them.”

You could have just said that in the first place, man...

I decided to set some ground rules, at least:

1. This is a friendly sparring match, not a duel to the death. No killing allowed.
2. Our warrior will only state his name after the fight's over.
3. Both sides agree not to hold any grudges, whatever the outcome.

The swordsman cheerfully consented, so the duel got underway immediately.

Ruijerd won fair and square, having cleanly fended off his opponent's most furious attacks. He didn't take it easy on the guy or anything; he just took a calm, low-risk approach, shutting down everything the swordsman tried until he had the man cornered.

“You've bested me completely, sir. I never expected to stumble across such a peerless fighter here... This world is truly full of wonders! What is your name, if I may ask?”

“Ruijerd Superdia. People also call me Dead End.”

“What? You're Dead End himself?! The fearsome Superd warrior?! I've heard tell of you many times on this continent!”

The swordsman seemed totally astonished by this. It seemed that much of humankind knew surprisingly little about the Superd at this point. Many weren't aware that they fought with three-pointed spears or had a red ‘jewel’ on their forehead; their emerald green hair was the only feature that remained common knowledge. In other words...four centuries after the war, they were deeply prejudiced against a whole group of people based on nothing but their *hair color*. How could anyone think that was a good enough reason to oppress someone?

“However...I notice that you have no hair, sir.”

“Yes. I recently felt the need to cut it off.”

“I-I see. Well, I wouldn't want to pry...”

By now, the man knew he was standing face-to-face with the most “fearsome” and “vicious” of the terrible Superd people, and he’d experienced the Superd’s strength firsthand. I would have expected him to shrink back in horror. But the two of them were both warriors, and that was apparently enough to form a bond of mutual respect between them. For those who lived in pursuit of strength, Ruijerd was someone to be admired rather than feared.

“To think I had the chance to spar with a legendary figure such as yourself... I’ll have to boast about this to everyone back home!”

That man, unlike most of the others we would run into, was clearly happy to have met Ruijerd. It was almost like they’d ran into a Hollywood superstar on the sidewalk—and discovered that despite his reputation for being rude, he was actually a warm and friendly guy.

“You there! My name is—”

Following that first duel, Ruijerd began receiving a constant stream of challengers. The farther south we went, the more of them we ran into.

A number of these warriors-in-training were well-versed in history, and pointed out that Ruijerd had the same name as the leader of the infamous Superd band from the days of the Laplace War. When he explained that he *was* that same man, they all reacted with astonishment. He’d then proceed to spend an entire day and night recounting his experiences during the war to them.

Old man Ruijerd did tend to prattle on once you got him started on the past. But his simple, straightforward descriptions of what really happened were apparently enthralling to other warriors like himself. In particular, they loved the part where he broke through a ring of 1,000 soldiers, went underground, and eventually got his revenge on Laplace. More than a few macho tears were shed.

If we turned that whole story into a book and got it published somehow, maybe we actually *could* rehabilitate the image of the Superd to some degree. “War Without Justice—Mortal Combat on the Demon Continent!” sounded pretty good, right? Or maybe “History’s Untold Truths: The Real Story of the Superd!”

Hey, I could probably print them up myself using Earth magic, right? And I knew all four of the major continental languages at this

point. Of course, there was a possibility I'd break some local law in the process and get thrown in jail somewhere, but it felt like an idea worth filing away for future reference at least.

"Goodbye then! Thank you again! I learned a great deal."

The warriors-in-training always said their farewells cheerfully. I don't think a single one left angry or upset.

And all of this was only possible because Ruijerd had cut off his hair.

Maybe we should just have all the Superd shave themselves bald?

All the while, we kept moving south, never losing sight of our goal. The eighth and ninth month of our journey came and went.

Of course, it wasn't all smooth sailing. Problems popped up numerous times. Eris could understand what the people around us were saying now; as a result, she'd sometimes flip out and start fights when people mocked or insulted us. Ruijerd's identity was exposed numerous times, which resulted in us being driven out of several cities. I also repeatedly tried to peep on Eris in the bath, only to have Ruijerd drag me off by the scruff of my neck.

The same problems kept cropping up at a fairly steady rate. At first, that made me anxious. I tried to think up ways to fix them, or prevent them from happening in the first place.

But when I really thought about it though? Eris got into fights, yes, but she never drew her sword on anyone. And when Ruijerd got chased out of town, it was never as violent and chaotic as his flight from Rikarisu. Once, a soldier we'd gotten to know actually said, "Sorry. Some people just get scared when they know there's a Superd around," in an apologetic tone of voice.

Also, I never actually *succeeded* with spying on Eris in the bath.

All of these problems were pretty minor in the scale of things, in other words. They never snowballed into any major crisis.

So I started worrying a bit less. Eris was a violent person; Ruijerd was a Superd; and I was a pervert. We'd all been the way we were since birth, and there wasn't much hope in changing us now. The three of us were managing as best we could. That was good enough for me. A screw-up now and then wasn't the end of the world.

No reason to stress out about it, right?

At some point, I really did start to feel that way. I wasn't taking our mistakes lightly, or underestimating what they cost us. I just learned how to relax a little and keep things in perspective. That may sound simple, and I guess it is. But it took months and months on the road with Ruijerd and Eris before I finally got the hang of it.

About a year had passed since we set out on our journey from Rikarisu. Before we knew it, the three of us had become A-ranked adventurers...

And at long last, we'd reached the city of Wind Port, on the very southern tip of the Demon Continent.

Extra Chapter: The Princess of Asura and the Angel

Ars, the capital of the Kingdom of Asura, was the largest and most populous city in the world. At its very center, there stood a white-walled castle—naturally enough, one said to be the world’s largest and most beautiful. It was known as the Silver Palace, and it was the residence of the royal family.

Within its walls, there raged a vicious, ugly, and perpetual struggle for power that belied its immaculate appearance. The kingdom’s nobles never tired of plotting, deceiving, and betraying each other. They waged battle day and night.

The world of this palace was a small and hellish one—a place where it was said that absolutely *no one* could be trusted.

As it happens, the “Displacement Incident” that had taken place in the Fittoa region of the kingdom had a major impact on the course of the wars waged within this castle.

This is the story of how those events were set in motion...

Aside from the residences of the royal family, the Silver Palace contained a number of splendid gardens.

There was the Rose Garden, full of plants with red flowers; the Peony Garden, full of plants with black flowers; the Hydrangea Garden, full of plants with blue flowers; and finally, a place where only white flowers bloomed—the Lily Garden.

This last was the particular favorite of a certain personage.

Her name was Ariel Anemoi Asura, and she was the second princess of the Kingdom of Asura. From her mother, the queen consort, a famous beauty, she’d inherited lovely features and shining golden

hair; from her father, the king, she'd inherited a peerlessly beautiful voice. And though she was not yet of age, her charisma was overpowering. The majority of the capital's residents already spoke of her as the most beautiful princess to have ever lived.

Once every three days, this young lady came to the Lily Garden. She would seat herself at a pure-white table, accompanied only by her guardian knight and her mage, and quietly take her tea.

In these moments, the sight of her was charming enough to make any woman sigh longingly, and so enthralling that no man could help but stare. Her beauty, like that of a fairy from some old folk tale, was such that it seemed uncouth even to approach her. Thus no one came up to speak with the princess when she visited the Lily Garden. Not a single soul dared to try and drink tea with her.

Sitting all alone at her table, she enjoyed her momentary respite alone, exchanging only a few brief words with her two guardians.

Her guardian knight was a boy of great beauty in his own right. He had lovely bright chestnut hair and strong facial features; his nose was shapely, his jawline well-defined.

His name was Luke Notos Greyrat. Second son of the Greyrat family, one of the kingdom's four great provincial houses, he was a talented young knight who had already reached the Intermediate rank in the Sword God style. There wasn't a single girl inside the castle who didn't know of him. Although still in his early teens, he already possessed a silver tongue, and never lost the interest of any lady he conversed with. With his dashing looks and clever mind, he was said to entrance every noble daughter who crossed his path. At the very least, no other man in the castle was nearly so admired by the girls his age.

The princess's guardian mage was somewhat older, perhaps sixteen or seventeen—a young man rather than a boy.

While not as remarkably good-looking as Luke, he was still handsome by any ordinary standards; his somewhat slender face possessed an amiable attractiveness. His presence added a dash of playful charm that nicely complemented the beauty of the other two, making it all the more difficult for anyone to imagine approaching them.

His name was Derrick Redbat, third son of the well-known Redbat house, and he was a magician of Advanced rank who had graduated from the illustrious Asura Institute of Magic.

What did these three talk about when they were alone? It was a matter of the utmost interest to all the young people living in the Silver Palace, but none of them knew the answer. On this day, as on many others, they were conversing quietly in the Lily Garden.

“Well then, what color were they?”

Ariel’s words echoed faintly through the quiet garden. Her voice truly was uncommonly beautiful; the sound of it brought to mind the tinkling of bells.

“A lovely shade of pink... Ah, but with a tinge of orange as well,” replied the young knight Luke from across the table, where he stood in attendance. His own voice was somewhat high-pitched, as one might expect from a boy of his age, but had clarity and fullness.

Derrick, the princess’s guardian mage, listened in silence. The somber expression on his face suggested he was ruminating on their words.

“Personally, I prefer pert cherry-blossom buds on a field of porcelain white...”

“With all due respect, Lady Ariel, I feel those that turn inward have a certain appeal as well.”

“Goodness! You like the inverted ones?”

Ariel’s tone was somewhat shocked, but Luke replied calmly. “Well, I will admit I’m not especially particular when it comes to such details. In the end, size is all that truly matters to me.”

Ariel sighed and shook her head. “Honestly. You have no taste at all, Luke.”

In reply, Luke simply shrugged his shoulders.

What exactly were these two talking about, one might ask?

“In any case, how did you enjoy this new maid? Sarisha, was it?”

“Her body was very sensitive, and her innocence was charming. It

made for quite a pleasant evening.”

The answer was quite simple: Luke had been describing the nipples of the girl he’d bedded just the other day.

“Is that so? Hmm. Now you’ve made me want to smuggle her into my bedchamber somehow.”

“I would be perfectly happy to assist, milady.”

“Oh? You’re already prepared to toss her aside, after sleeping with her only once?”

“I’m afraid Sarisha’s breasts weren’t quite large enough for my liking.”

Ariel and Luke, in stark contrast to their appearances, were in fact a pair of lecherous young philanderers. For some time now, they’d been preying indiscriminately on the palace maids and the daughters of mid-rank nobles.

“Nothing’s more exciting than teasing cute girls like that, if you ask me. I imagine Sarisha would squeal quite nicely...”

Only a limited number of people in the palace were aware of this, but Princess Ariel was both bisexual and a sadist. Many among the Asuran nobility possessed extraordinary sexual proclivities, and she was certainly no exception. Luke wasn’t quite as extreme a case, but his love of big-breasted women knew no bounds.

Hiding in the shadow of their outward appearance and reputation, the two of them lived carefree lives of pleasure—indifferent to the plotting and intrigue that defined the royal court of Asura.

In this, they were hardly unusual for those of their rank. The majority of the nobility indulged in behavior just as scandalous, or even more so. Asura was a kingdom with a 400-year history that had never known war or famine. For many of its upper class, a demonstrated taste for decadence was a sort of status symbol. Ariel and Luke were still young, but they were already immersed in the amusements of their kind.

However...

“Luke. Lady Ariel. I think it would be best for you to behave... somewhat more discreetly.”

Derrick was a man with a more conventional mindset. In no small

part, this was because the Redbats were merely mid-rank provincial nobility. They lived in an entirely different world from the decadence of the capital.

One might wonder why such a young man had been granted the prestigious role of guardian mage to the second princess, but the answer was quite simple: his results in the Institute had been superb. Advanced-tier magicians of noble birth were a rare commodity.

“Oh, Derrick...you really ought to learn what it means to be an Asuran noble.”

“Milady is quite right, Derrick. You’re *always* like this. If you don’t figure out how to read the room, you’ll never be popular with the ladies.”

As Ariel and Luke shrugged their shoulders, Derrick heaved a heavy sigh.

“That’s not what I meant, Lady Ariel. You may very well rule this kingdom someday, so it seems unwise to expose yourself to gossip and jealousy. You risk making enemies.”

This time, it was Princess Ariel’s turn to let out a long sigh. “Look, Derrick. You’re always saying things like that, but you do remember that I’m the *second princess*, correct?”

“Of course. Which means you’re high in the line of succession, and a potential candidate to succeed the throne.”

“I have two older brothers and one older sister. It does appear that they’ve found a husband for my sister, but my brothers are wrestling ruthlessly for the throne. With them around, there isn’t the slightest chance I’ll ever become queen.”

“That isn’t true. You’re the daughter of the queen consort. That makes you the only fully legitimate heir to the throne, and—”

“Stop it, Derrick,” Ariel interrupted sharply. “What if those words reached my brothers’ ears? Do you *want* them to send assassins after me? It’s bad enough that I’ve got all these nobles swearing fealty to me out of self-interest...”

“If you chose to fight, Lady Ariel, I’d happily lay down my life to protect you from anyone they may send.”

“Would you please stop saying such alarming things? That’s not too convincing anyway. I know what you really think of Luke and me...”

You'd probably like to get me caught up in a power struggle just so you can abandon me when the fighting starts, wouldn't you?"

"Wha—" Derrick's eyes went wide with shock. After a moment, his body began quivering, his face grew fierce, and he clenched his hands into fists.

"Look here, Derrick. I don't care if I never take the throne. I can still drink tea in a lovely garden and live my life the way I please, and that's enough for me. I wouldn't stand a chance against my brothers anyway. The idea of throwing myself voluntarily into that mess is just *absurd*."

Ariel's pessimism was fully justifiable. No matter how high her place in the order of succession, she was younger than her rivals and had far fewer allies. Her chances of victory were slim to none. Surely, then, it was wiser not to strive for the throne at all and simply live a life of indulgent pleasure. She was still a princess of the largest country in the world, so that option was available to her.

"Never mind then..." Derrick's heart was clouded with frustration, but he could find no other words to say.

As he turned and left the garden, Ariel and Luke shrugged their shoulders, then resumed their discourse on the nipples of the palace's women.

It wasn't that Derrick had abandoned his responsibilities as the princess's guardian mage. He was just going to the bathroom.

Derrick and Luke were tasked with protecting Ariel at all times, but they were only human, so their bodies had certain needs. When either of them felt the call of nature, they would usually inform the other and do their business as quickly as possible. In this world, as in any other, people were never so vulnerable as when they were relieving themselves.

The sweetly fragrant air of the Lily Garden had never agreed with Derrick. At first, he'd informed Luke every time he felt the need to leave it for the nearest facility, but over time, this became so routine that Ariel and Luke began to expect it. Eventually, the princess ordered him

not to bother announcing his intentions anymore. However extreme her tastes might be in some respects, she didn't care to be reminded of scatological matters in the middle of her tea-time.

As he shut himself up inside the lavatory, Derrick let out a long sigh. He was mentally replaying the conversation he'd just had with Princess Ariel. Ariel insisted she had no interest whatsoever in becoming queen, but Derrick so badly wanted her to take the throne.

It wasn't that he thought her brothers, the first prince and second prince, were unworthy candidates. If either took the throne, they'd no doubt mature into a respectable, ordinary king comparable to those who'd come before.

But the way Derrick saw it, that wasn't good enough. With either prince on the throne, Asura would continue on its current path—rotten to the core, but expanding nonetheless. The nobility's ugly, meaningless squabbling would continue unchecked, wasting money and energy that may otherwise go toward progress. And in time, Asura might grow vulnerable to foreign influence.

This land had never known hunger. No matter how corrupt the nobility, no matter how severe their taxes, the people *never* went hungry. Thus, their discontent rarely festered into fury; few emerged to challenge the status quo. There had been no major rebellions or civil wars.

As a result of this, the kingdom had stagnated.

Of course, it was still making steady progress in the fields of magic and technology. But the King Dragon Realm to the south had overtaken it in technological development, and the Magic Nations to the north were making greater strides in arcane research.

While Asura still had overwhelming advantages in other respects, at this rate it was hard to say where things would stand after another century...or even half a century. The King Dragon Realm in particular was watching Asura like a hawk for any sign of weakness, eager to claim some part of its bountiful land.

Asura currently believed that the mountains lining its borders meant it was safe from foreign invasion, but how would it fare against an even more technologically advanced King Dragon Realm army fifty years from now? And what if the Magic Nations seized the chance to invade from the north...?

“Lady Ariel *could* change everything, and yet...”

Derrick genuinely believed that the second princess was capable of pushing Asura onto a different path.

He still remembered the first time he'd met her very clearly. It was only a few years earlier, at a coming-of-age celebration held by the kingdom. At the time, Derrick had just graduated from the Institute of Magic. While he hadn't been the top student of his class, he'd placed very highly, and he'd already secured a post with the Asuran Royal Magicians, who he'd be joining a few months later.

Derrick knew he was a capable magician, but also an unremarkable one. He had no high expectations for himself. But that day, he encountered a certain charming young girl. Although Ariel was not yet of age herself, she'd been invited to the party as the guest of honor. Despite her youth, she delivered her congratulatory speech in a clear, confident style; in Derrick's eyes, her wit and intelligence outshone the top student who'd spoken at his graduation from the Institute.

Sometime later, after he'd joined the Royal Magicians, his father told him that the position of guardian mage to the second princess was vacant, and offered to recommend him for the post—while warning it'd be a long shot. He had enthusiastically accepted.

Ariel was a competent and dynamic person. At the moment she was spending her days drinking tea and her nights jumping on the maids, yes...but by nature, she was diligent, sociable, and willing to work hard to improve herself. If she were to assume the throne and devote herself to strengthening her country, Derrick was positive Asura would take great strides forward in a single generation. It might even be possible for it to conquer the entire Central Continent.

For one thing, she was remarkably charismatic. Both the Institute of Magic and the Royal Magicians were full of what one might call disaffected people. There were many who whispered words of criticism toward the ministers who currently dominated the government, or toward the nobility and the royal family.

However, in all the years he'd spent in these places, Derrick had never heard anyone speak badly of Ariel.

He had every confidence that she could become a ruler like Gaunis Freean Asura, who'd led humankind through the latter stages of

the Laplace War and taken the throne in its aftermath—a ruler beloved by all her people. There were already quite a few people who would gladly give their lives for Ariel’s sake. Derrick himself was one of them; it had been painful and infuriating to hear her dismiss that loyalty so casually.

“To be sure, her life’s at little risk if she keeps acting in this fashion... but she’s lowering herself to the level of some corrupt nobleman...”

Perhaps she truly didn’t *want* to shoulder the expectations of her countrymen? Had he been chosen as mage guardian specifically because she thought he wouldn’t push her toward a more difficult path? The princess never said as much, but perhaps she detested him...

Derrick heaved another sigh.

But just as he was sinking deeper into melancholy, he heard the faint sound of a human voice.

“Hm?”

Someone was evidently having a conversation out behind the lavatory.

“Princess Ariel...”

“...kill...”

Having picked out a few alarming words, Derrick held his breath and pressed his ear to the rear wall.

“Sir Grabel views Lady Ariel as a threat then?”

“That’s right. Her popularity with the commonfolk is remarkable after all. He’s quite upset that she’s better-known than he is, even though she barely ever shows herself in public.”

“It is a little strange, come to think of it... Whatever part she’s playing at the moment, she might be laying the groundwork behind the scenes.”

“Right. When you can’t win a head-on fight, you’ve got to skulk around in the shadows instead, I suppose.”

Derrick furrowed his brow at this. Ariel’s popularity with the citizenry was partly due to her natural charisma, but she also showed herself to them far more often than First Prince Grabel. Her brother dutifully attended internal palace ceremonies, but rarely ventured to

events held outside its walls; in contrast, Ariel spent a good deal of time at various external functions. For example, she'd recently attended the dedication ceremony for a new bridge over the Alteir river, becoming one of the first people to cross it. Not long before, she'd been the guest of honor at the Institute's major magical combat tournament, handing the winner his prizes with a bouquet of flowers, and allowing him the honor of kissing her hand. It was precisely because she invested time in such events, totally unconnected to the power struggles within the royal court, that she'd grown popular with the commonfolk.

"If that really is the case though..."

"Indeed. The girl will become an obstacle."

"...I suppose it might be best to take precautions against future trouble."

"I feel similarly. And so, out of deep concern for the interests of Prince Grabel and the Kingdom of Asura as a whole, I've already made certain...arrangements."

"Hahaha. I really ought to have expected as much from you, I suppose."

Derrick was tempted to burst out of the lavatory and kill the men outside it, but quickly quashed the thought. These two were almost certainly nobles of the first prince's faction. They were men who'd spend their fortunes freely—and resort to the vilest deeds imaginable—for the sake of shaping events to their liking; when cornered, they would offer every cowardly excuse they could to save their own skins. There were many of their ilk inside the palace.

Derrick could kill them here and now with his magic, but that would be a meaningless act. Everyone would assume that Ariel had ordered her guardian mage to murder two nobles loyal to the first prince. That would be interpreted as an act of open hostility against Grabel himself, and lead to a constant stream of attacks from his followers.

For a moment, Derrick wondered if such an outcome might force Ariel to pursue the throne after all...but if the princess had no actual motivation to fight, they would be put on the defensive, driven into a corner, and ultimately butchered like animals.

Abandoning the idea of killing the men, Derrick left the lavatory without a word. One way or another, he had to take action against this

new threat.

One of the nobles said that “arrangements” had already been made. In which case, something would likely happen soon—perhaps even within the next few days. Their objective was likely Ariel herself, but as her most loyal guards, Derrick and Luke were also potential targets.

Would it be an assassin? Or perhaps some type of poison?

He had to tell Ariel of this immediately...and urge her, once again, to face this battle head-on.

With these thoughts running through his mind, Derrick strode rapidly back toward the Lily Garden, clutching his staff under his robe so he could protect himself against any sudden ambushes.

“...How long has it been since the last time I fought?”

Back at the Institute of Magic, he’d participated in regular mock battles—sometimes against other young magicians, sometimes against students from a knight academy. At times these were larger-scale group matches, pitting off teams of three to five. Several times a year, the students were also escorted into a local forest by their instructors and hired adventurers, in order to gain experience fighting against monsters.

It wasn’t as if Derrick had never taken a life before. In one mock battle, he’d accidentally killed his opponent with a spell that happened to strike him in the head. And during the selection process for the role of guardian mage, he’d been required to fight and kill a convict previously sentenced to death—as a test of his willingness to do what was necessary.

However, if someone were sending an assassin to face both himself and Luke, they’d undoubtedly choose an experienced and efficient killer. It’d be a life-or-death struggle. The thought sent a small shudder down Derrick’s arm.

“Can I protect her...?”

He voiced his anxieties...then shook his head to clear them from his mind.

This was something Derrick had no way of knowing, but...

The Fittoa Displacement Incident was taking place at this exact

instant.

“Lady Arie— Wha—?!”

The moment Derrick stepped back into the Lily Garden, his jaw dropped open in shock.

His eyes were fixed on an area toward the back of the garden—a section known as the Hibiscus Forest.

An enormous beast that stood on two legs had just trotted out from among the trees.

It was a Terminator Boar.

By itself, these were D-ranked monsters, but they were often accompanied by loyal packs of Assault Dogs which could raise their threat level to C- or even B-class. Normally, they were only found in the depths of forests, but their numbers were large, and sometimes one would emerge to attack a nearby town—typically seizing livestock or human children to consume.

Many years ago, a Terminator Boar accompanied by twenty Assault Dogs had killed every soul living in a small Asuran village. As a result, they were one of the most infamous monsters living within the Kingdom’s borders. In settlements near forests, children were often told that a boar would carry them off and eat them unless they went to bed on time, as others might be threatened with stories of the Superd.

Derrick, like most of his countrymen, was familiar with the name and appearance of these monsters, and their reputation as a fearsome beast.

“How...?”

Why was there a Terminator Boar *here*? This was the royal palace, home to the ruling family of the world’s largest nation. It wasn’t a *safe* place by any means, but it was certainly the last location one would ever expect to find a wild monster. How could one possibly have appeared here?

Derrick’s mind flashed to the conversation he’d just overheard. Had that noble somehow arranged this? That couldn’t be right. No mere

nobleman could possibly have smuggled such a wild, enormous beast into the heart of the palace. Even the kingdom's most powerful ministers wouldn't be capable of such a thing.

Although he had no way of knowing this, the Terminator Boar had in fact been teleported to this location only moments ago as a result of the Fittoa Displacement Incident.

As Derrick's mind struggled to process the situation, his gaze found Princess Ariel, and he let out an involuntary gasp.

She was still at her table, chattering happily away with Luke about some vulgar topic. The two of them hadn't noticed the Terminator Boar—even though it was staring right at them, its eyes glittering like a hunter sizing up its prey.

Derrick broke into a run. And as he ran, he began chanting a magic incantation.

However, the Terminator Boar was also on the move. Perhaps it had noticed Derrick, or sensed a threat; either way, it charged through the garden's vegetation, heading straight for Princess Ariel.

I won't make it in time!

Derrick abandoned his incantation halfway through and shouted, "Run, Lady Ariel!" at the top of his lungs.

With an exclamation of surprise, the princess rose to her feet—just in time to notice the huge brown blur rushing at her from the side. She jumped out of its path.

As Ariel hit the ground, the Terminator Boar smashed its way through a number of the garden's delicate trees, then turned back toward its target.

By this point, Derrick had placed himself between Ariel and the monster. The enormous boar loomed before the magician, drool dribbling from its mouth. Its glittering, bestial eyes were fixed on him.

What could a magician possibly do in this situation? At this close range, against this large a monster? There wasn't the slightest chance he could complete an incantation in time.

So Derrick didn't even bother. He simply spread his arms out wide, and shouted with all he had. "Luke! I leave the rest to you!"

A split-second later, the Terminator Boar's fist sent him flying.

The punch broke all his ribs and crushed several vital organs. Blood shot from his mouth as he hurtled through the air. When he finally smashed into a wall some five meters away, he felt his spine shatter as well.

“Ghaagh!”

He was only fortunate in that he didn’t lose consciousness immediately. But perhaps that wasn’t much of a blessing.

Oh... I’m dying.

Derrick’s mind was oddly clear. He knew he was done for. He could smell his own death in the air. The wounds he’d suffered were fatal ones, without a doubt. *I saw someone die from injuries much like these once, didn’t I...?*

He felt no fear. Perhaps it had all happened so suddenly that his brain hadn’t quite caught up yet.

Staring across the garden, Derrick watched Luke draw his sword and charge straight at the Terminator Boar. *Don’t be a fool, Luke... You can’t possibly beat that thing single-handedly... Oh, right. The door’s on that side... So you can’t just run away, can you...?*

Derrick tried looking around by moving just his eyes. *What about Lady Ariel? Is she safe?*

He found her soon enough. She was rushing toward him—her face full of shock and confusion, but not terror.

“Derrick! Oh, this can’t be happening... We’ve got to get a healer here at once!”

As the princess cried out in alarm, Derrick mustered what little strength remained to him to speak. “Ungh... Leave me... You have to... run away...” He coughed.

“Don’t try to speak, Derrick! Someone, help! Is there no one here?!”

“Khh... This is...pointless, Lady Ariel... I’m well past saving...”

“No...no! Don’t be ridiculous! You’ve got to hang in there, Derrick!”

Derrick looked at the princess, now clearly on the verge of tears, with some surprise. He’d been convinced Ariel and Luke hated having him around, but perhaps that wasn’t entirely true. Despite everything,

he felt a small roguish impulse rising inside him.

“Well, Princess? I didn’t...a-abandon you...now did I?”

Ariel jerked back, seemingly startled by his words. And after a moment, she began gazing at her deeply loyal guardian in a way she’d never looked at him before. “Derrick...”

“Lady Ariel, this is...my last request. Please, I beg you...take the throne...and make Asura into...a better country! Gggh!”

A broken rib pierced Derrick’s lung, and he coughed up a large amount of blood.

Ariel watched in silence for a moment, then nodded and turned around.

An enormous boar stood in front of her.

Luke, knocked aside some time earlier, was looking over at Ariel from the ground with an expression of pure despair.

Ariel glared fiercely at the creature for a moment, then began shouting. “I don’t know where you came from or why, but you stand before the future Queen of Asura! I’m not going to die today. Begone!”

Naturally enough, words meant nothing at all to a Terminator Boar. The beast only snuffled softly, its nostrils trembling in anticipation of a tasty meal.

It took one step forward, then another.

Watching helplessly from the ground, Derrick said a silent prayer. As a follower of the Millis Church, he turned to the heavens in search of aid.

Please, God...please help us. You can take my life, but help Princess Ariel. This world still has need of her...

He prayed in vain of course. Derrick knew that better than anyone. Saint Millis had been a truly great man, and the savior of humanity...but you couldn’t expect him to grant you a convenient miracle every time you needed one. That was just the way things were. Even so, Derrick couldn’t help beseeching him.

At last, the beast drew within striking distance of Princess Ariel. Its massive fist rose into the air.

But then—the prayer was answered.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

With an ear-splitting shriek, an angel tumbled from the heavens. It was a young, white-haired angel—wearing rather shoddy clothes.

“Aah! Aaaaaah!”

With a charming, half-crazed war cry, she stretched both hands toward the massive boar...and somehow, blew the upper half of its body apart.

Thank you, God... Thank you so much. Witnessing this, Derrick shed one final tear. *Please...watch over Lady Ariel.*

And with his heart full of peace, the guardian mage breathed his last...

The Fittoa Displacement Incident cost one young magician his life—and provided Ariel Anemoi Asura with a new and different purpose.

What path did she follow in the aftermath of these events? How did they change Luke Greyrat?

And what became of the angel that fell from the heavens?

These are tales for another time...



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